

WOMEN NEGOTIATING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING:  
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS  
IN A SELECT UNIVERSITY SETTING

A Dissertation

by

LINDA THORSEN BOND

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2008

Major Subject: Educational Human Resource Development

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## ABSTRACT

Women Negotiating Collaborative Learning:  
An Exploratory Study of Undergraduate Students  
in a Select University Setting.

(May 2008)

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The purpose of the study is to explore women's experiences as they negotiate collaborative group projects in a college course. This qualitative study extends the existing literature by providing depth to the research on women's learning through observation of women in group activities, surveys about college students' attitudes toward collaborative learning, and in-depth interviews with university women.

The study isolates four ways women negotiate collaborative learning in a college course. (1) Women take group work seriously and consider it to be very important. (2) Women are often leaders in group work. Sixty-four percent of the women and only two percent of the men said they are usually the leader in collaborative learning situations. (3) Women end up doing more than their share of the work, although they may have won the leadership roles. (4) Earning good grades is very important to the women studied, and they are willing to work harder than anyone else in a group to earn them.

The theories of how women learn include the debate over whether women are relational or task-oriented. The conclusion of this study is that in the university classes

studied, women are both. However, textbooks on collaborative learning may contain passages that indicate that in mixed-sex groups males will emerge as leaders. In addition, some textbooks suggest that women might lead when groups are primarily dealing with relationship issues, and men will lead when groups are primarily task-oriented or where a democratic rather than a participatory style is preferred.

Discussions of collaborative learning often include the goal of helping counterweigh the hidden curriculum that diminishes women. Although collaborative learning can be an important classroom technique, this study points out that it is important that collaborative learning and feminist pedagogy not be conflated. Some collaborative learning groups are a site of discrimination and power difference for women.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The inspiration for this study comes from the experience I have had teaching advertising to undergraduates in the Department of Communication at a university in East Texas. When I first began teaching five years ago, all the work I gave the students in my advanced advertising class was collaborative, or small group learning. At the first of each semester, I divided the class into student ad agencies and the students worked together to create advertising campaigns. This seemed logical, since the students were preparing for their future at advertising agencies where much of the work would be done in small groups. I imagined that the students would enjoy collaborative learning as much as I do, that group work would lead to synergetic relationships that would allow them to become more than the sum of their parts. I took great care to use well-developed collaborative learning techniques, and I carefully weighed the composition of groups.

After teaching over 400 students in the Department of Communication, I realized that working on group projects for a grade can be complex and challenging, especially for women. Some women told me they do not like group work because they do not want to rely on other students for a grade, especially if those students are not as motivated as they are. Other women worried that they would end up doing all the work and have to share the grade they earned. I have seen significant differences in the way men and women negotiate collaborative learning in my classes, and most of the differences do not appear in the literature about collaborative learning.

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This dissertation follows the style and format of *Adult Education Quarterly*.

Philosophical theories about learning suggested the universality of collaborative learning as a technique that is effective for women's learning (p. 234; Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Bierema, 1999; Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000). Other writers, including Hayes and Flannery (2000), have called those theories into question by proposing that women's orientation toward relationships is often interpreted in simplistic terms, and may result in the conclusion that all women learn better in groups rather than alone.

I am interested in learning how to effectively utilize various techniques of collaborative learning to help women students succeed in college. In this research, I seek to address how women negotiate collaborative learning in hopes that better understanding will add to the philosophical stance about women's learning. In addition, while learning theory around girls in primary and secondary schools does exist, less has been researched and written about how learning theory applies to women in college.

### Background to the Study

Collaborative learning refers to a variety of techniques involving joint intellectual effort by students (Delucchi, 2007, p. 320). According to Barkley, Cross and Major (2005), "To collaborate is to work with another or others. In practice, collaborative learning has come to mean students working in pairs or small groups to achieve shared learning goals. It is learning through group work rather than learning by working alone" (p. 4). Although collaborative learning may have many forms, Matthews (1996) defines it simply: "Collaborative learning means that students and faculty work together to create knowledge. It is a pedagogy that has at its center the assumption that people make meaning together and that the process enriches and enlarges them" (p. 101). Another way

of looking at a group is as “a system of people who bring to the experience an individualized genetic make-up, a personal life history, varying combinations of personality traits, differing values and attitudes and a singular view of the world” (Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003, p. 6). While some people use the terms interchangeably, generally “collaborative learning” is used in higher education and “cooperative learning” is used in K-12 education. In this dissertation study, I use the term collaborative learning to indicate group learning in higher education.

The ability to work collaboratively has become increasingly important in education and in the workforce. According to Barkley, Cross and Major (2005), “Many employers consider willingness and readiness to engage in productive teamwork a requirement for success. Collaborative learning offers students opportunities to learn valuable interpersonal and teamwork skills and dispositions by participating in task-oriented learning groups” (pp. xi-xii). In collaborative learning, a class is divided into groups and the students in those groups are assigned a project. Students produce knowledge through multiple strategies, make decisions through negotiation and consensus-building (Karlyn, 2006). While educators often speak of how group or team work will serve students well in “the real world,” Vella (1994) writes that “Teams *are* the real world. Team efforts in a learning situation are not vicarious and they are not contrived” (p. 19).

Current research supports collaborative learning in higher education. This research indicates group work may lead to greater learning gains and heighten levels of academic and professional confidence in collegiate students (Jimenez Soffa, 2007). Rodriguez (1999) points out that the National Research Council’s national science

education standards (NSES) document suggests that teachers should use student-centered and collaborative styles of learning to teach math and science. After a study of 383 reports of student learning, Springer, Stanne and Donovan (1999) concluded that science, math, engineering and technology students who learned in small groups demonstrated greater achievement and higher persistence than students in traditional instruction.

In adult education, collaborative learning has gained a strong foothold, according to Merriam and Brockett (1997) who posit that the importance of the learner's experience has helped shape techniques of collaborative learning as "a sharing of information in relationships of equality that promotes new growth in each participant" (p. 249).

Collaborative learning incorporates intentional design, co-laboring and meaningful learning. The learning part of the term happens "when two or more students are laboring together and sharing the workload equitably as they progress toward learning outcomes" (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005, p. 5). When group work is effective, there is synergy and the group is stronger than its individual parts. Collaboration can have a positive effect on women in the classroom, according to Chin (2004), Kolodny (1998), Carli and Eagly (1999) and Mayberry (1999). A study of over 2,000 college students indicates that men and women were equally likely to prefer collaborative learning, while minorities, regardless of gender, were more predisposed toward collaborative learning than Whites (Cabrera, Crissman, & Bernal, 2002). However, some techniques used in the design of the group disadvantage students who are most concerned about grades. This may stem from the feeling that group work implies a loss of individual control (King & Behnke, 2005). Student dissention also includes complaints that group grades are unfair, debase grade reports, undermine motivation, convey incorrect messages, violate

individual accountability, generate resistance to cooperative learning and often are challenged in court (Kagan, 1995, 1996).

### Statement of the Problem

Educators are concerned with how to provide significant learning opportunities to women in response to the evolving, expanding topic of how women learn. Because collaborative learning is one of the techniques frequently suggested to enhance the classroom experience for women, research on group learning has become increasingly significant. The problem I explore is the need for information about how women experience their negotiation of collaborative group projects in a university.

Women now number 58 percent of all undergraduates, earn better college grades than men do, and are more likely than men to get bachelor's degrees and master's degrees (<http://www.sfasu.edu>). The search for ways to provide significant learning experiences to women has led many educators to incorporate collaborative learning into their curriculum (Baker & Campbell, 2004; Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Stanley & Porter, 2002; Will, 1997).

Gilligan (1982) and the authors of the ground-breaking book, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (Clinchy, 1996), jump-started many studies on how women learn and come to know and understand the world around them. Those philosophical theories about women's learning triggered research that indicated women's learning may be enhanced by collaborative learning (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Bierema, 1999; Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000; K. A. Bruffee, 1993).

Literature about collaborative learning suggests that many women place more emphasis on relationships than men and are more likely to work well in groups because

they communicate caring and want to help others (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Fletcher, Jordan, & Miller, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003). However, those theories have been challenged by researchers who questioned the efficacy of essentializing women's learning; Hayes and Flannery (2000) are among those who suggest that educators must be wary of overgeneralization about the role of connection in women's lives.

Many university faculty members routinely include a variety of group activities to make their classes more interactive, interesting and conducive to learning (Baker & Campbell, 2004; Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005; Cabrera, Crissman, & Bernal, 2002; Graetz & Goliver, 2002). Cabrera, Crissman, and Bernal's 2002 study of college students indicates that men and women are equally likely to prefer collaborative learning.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to explore women's experiences as they negotiate collaborative group projects in a college course. This qualitative study extends the existing literature by providing depth to the research on women's learning through observation of women in group activities, surveys about college students' attitudes toward collaborative learning, and in-depth interviews with women who were taking a university course on Small Group Communication. It is intended to explore their thoughts about their experiences and the way they negotiate their experiences in the class.

There is a dearth of qualitative studies that assess how women negotiate collaborative learning in higher education and in particular how they learn in small groups where the project results in a grade. I am interested in contributing to the field by

exploring and analyzing learning in collaborative groups as a distinct experience for women.

There have been studies on using collaborative learning techniques for girls (AAUW, 1999; Beausay, 1996; K. A. Bruffee, 1995; Colletti, 2007; Johnson & Johnson, 1998; Kerr, 1997; Monastersky, 2005) but there is a gap in the research on university women. By studying college women in select collaborative learning situations, I hope to contribute to an under-developed area of research about how women negotiate collaborative learning in higher education.

### Research Questions

- 1) How do women negotiate collaborative learning in a college course?
- 2) How do the theories of how women learn help us understand the experience of women in a collaborative learning context in a college course?
- 3) How do the theories of collaborative learning inform the experiences of women in a collaborative learning context in a college course?

### Conceptual Framework

One conceptual framework for this dissertation is how women learn. The epistemological perspectives discussed in *Women's Ways of Knowing (WWK)* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986) characterize women's learning as collaborative and empathetic, and have been "promoted as more effective and appropriate ways of learning in the workplace and in formal education than the competitive, individualistic modes of knowing traditionally associated with men" (Hayes, 2001, p. 35). Revisions and discussions of *WWK* in subsequent research have proven to be an effective conceptual tool for understanding how women construct knowledge (Baker & Campbell, 2004; Beck

& Beck-Gersheim, 2002; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Jimenez Soffa, 2007; Martin, 1999; Taylor & Marienau, 1995). Other researchers, including Hayes and Flannery (2000) caution against essentializing women's ways of learning. Hayes (2001) points out that women's differences may be used to assert women's deficiency as learners and that generalizations about women's learning may be based on only the experiences of a "handful of women" (p. 36). I am interested in hearing, as Caffarella and Olson (1993) advocated, "the alternative voices of development...the voices of women" (p. 126).

Another conceptual framework for the study is collaborative learning. This technique includes group work in classes that consists of intentional design, co-laboring and the creation of meaningful learning. Theories and techniques about this important educational trend range from suggestions that collaborative learning is good for all students (Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003; Keyton, 2006), to studies that indicate collaborative learning is the preferred learning tool of minority students (Cabrera, Crissman, & Bernal, 2002). Some researchers have described the learning done in groups as being like "the coherent light of a laser rather than the incoherent and shattered light of a light bulb" (Senge, 1990, p. 234). Synergy is often mentioned: "The energy created by the members and the outputs of the group are the result of the dynamic relationships of the members, who are constantly defining and redefining themselves, their behavior and the functions of the group" (Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003, p. 5).

The use of collaborative learning techniques has increased as faculty members in higher education try to engage and address the needs of students from all backgrounds and perspectives (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005). It is no secret that interest in



collaborative learning at colleges and universities is on the rise--an online search of the ERIC and EBSCO databases shows almost 15,000 articles include the words *collaborative learning* and *higher education*.

### Significance of the Study

The findings of this qualitative study add to the existing literature on how women learn. As the numbers of women in higher education climb above the numbers of men, understanding how women negotiate collaborative learning becomes increasingly important. In order to meet the needs of women students in colleges and universities, educators should be supplied with information about what women actually say and do when they are in groups. Constructing classroom activities can be done more effectively with an expanded understanding of how women learn.

The research aimed at understanding how women learn in groups is sparse, and most of it is quantitative. Qualitative research will add an understanding of the meaning women have constructed of their experiences. As Merriam (1998) suggested, the key concern in qualitative research is to understand the area of interest from the participants' perspectives, not the researcher's.

Various studies have been conducted on women in collaborative learning since Cafferella and Olson's study. However, there has not been a study which combined a qualitative survey of attitudes followed by classroom observation and comprehensive interviews of women while they are negotiating collaborative college classes.

As Hayes (2001) suggested, "Taking a new look at women's learning can reveal more complexity and dynamism than we initially might have discerned. It offers us

greater challenges, but also greater opportunity to create learning experiences that are supportive of both women and men” (p. 41).

### Assumptions of the Study

Assumptions made at the beginning of the study include:

1. Better understanding of how women negotiate collaborative learning would be valuable for educators as well as students.
2. Participants would truthfully respond to questions about their experiences in collaborative learning.
3. Participants would allow me access to their experiences and attitudes about learning experiences.
4. Surveys, observation and in-depth interviews would provide a data-rich picture of how women negotiate collaborative learning.

### Limitations of the Study

Some of the limitations of this study include:

1. Because this is a qualitative study, it is not meant to be generalizable as the findings are based on a small purposeful sample. It may, however, reveal the meaning people have constructed, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 1998).
2. Because the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, (Merriam, 1998), my beliefs and my viewpoints about collaborative learning has an effect on the way I interpret the data. I have made use of member checks and other strategies to make my work as trustworthy as possible.

3. Because participants know I am part of the faculty at this university, they might have been afraid their responses would influence their grades or the attitudes of faculty members toward them.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

How do women learn? That is at the heart of the question of how women negotiate collaborative learning. A review of the literature on how women learn in collaboration and connectedness builds on the evolving history of women's ways of learning. The opening section of this literature review is concerned with how the research about women's ways of learning has led to the evolution of collaborative learning techniques for women. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the current literature about collaborative learning and women's place in it. I am interested in understanding how gender intersects with collaborative learning, so I can contribute to the body of knowledge about how working in groups effects women as learners.

#### How Women Learn

Gilligan (1982) began a public conversation about a mode of being called *connected knowing*. In *a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* is based on Gilligan's research on gender-related differences. She theorized that when women construct the adult domain, the world of relationships emerges and becomes the focus of attention and concern. She suggested that women's sense of self may be organized around being able to make and maintain affiliations and relationships. Gilligan used the term *separate* to describe the self that is essentially autonomous (separate from others) and *connected* as the self that is essentially in relationship (connected to others). The separate self experiences relationships in terms of reciprocity, considering others as it wishes to be considered. The connected self experiences relationships as "response to others in their terms" (Lyons, 1983).

*Women's Ways of Knowing (WWK)* by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986) was pivotal in turning attention toward collaborative learning as an educational tool to advance women's learning. An overview of the topologies first disclosed in WWK includes (1) Silence, in which women are voiceless and subject to the whims of external authority (2) Received knowledge, in which women are receiving and/or reproducing knowledge from authorities (3) Subjective knowledge, in which women acknowledge their inner voice, and know that truth and knowledge is personal and intuitive (4) Procedural knowledge, which is characterized by objective procedures for obtaining and communicating knowledge and (5) Constructed knowledge, the stage in which all knowledge is constructed and the knower is an intimate part of the known.

The authors wrote about connected classes in which teachers accepted the unique perspective of students, tried to discern the truth inside them and welcomed diversity of opinion: "Connected education follows a straighter path: The student is treated from the start not as a subordinate or an object but as "independent, a subject" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, p. 224). Belenky, et al also clarified that the connected voice of which Gilligan spoke was not exclusively a female voice. "Separate and connected knowing are not gender-specific. The two modes may be gender-related: It is possible that more women than men tip toward connected knowing and more men than women toward separate knowing" (pp. 102-103).

Belenky and her colleagues explored Gilligan's assertion that women tend to learn best in environments that promote mutual openness and an ethic of care, cooperation and collaboration. They explained, "The connected class transforms private truths into objects publicly available to the members of the class who, through stretching

and sharing, add to themselves as knowers by absorbing in their own fashion their classmates' ideas" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986, pp. 222-223).

In *WWK*, there is the explanation that in the connected class, truth comes through consensus, not conflict. The connected teacher systematically empathizes with the participants but does not abandon herself to their perspectives. She has authority based on cooperation and is a believer who trusts students' thinking and encourages them to expand it.

In the late 1980s, Gilligan's work was decried as essentialist and potentially racist amid charges that her work was based on White, heterosexual, middle-class women. Gilligan responded to the charges by stating that her sample had more diversity than first assumed. She also asserted that she does not believe that gender differences in moral development are biologically determined, and that she does not see the ethic of care as unique to women (Chrisler & Smith, 2004).

In *Coming of Age in Academe: Rekindling Women's Hopes and Reforming the Academy*, Martin (1999) argued that many feminist scholars had failed to treat Gilligan's observation of a different voice as a hypothesis, a serious question worthy of serious inquiry. Martin decried the fact that Gilligan was not able to defend her sample against charges that it was only representative of White, heterosexual, middle class women. Martin explained what she believed caused the charges:

From the point of view of those making the accusations, at stake in women's self-policing was the deep-seated fear that our own research would unwittingly reinforce Western culture's stereotyped vision of women and a genuine desire to rid our theories and ourselves of racist tendencies. From the standpoint of the growth and development of the field of feminist scholarship itself, at stake was methodological advice that stunts feminist inquiry and promotes a view of women who differ from oneself as utterly Other. (p. 21)

Despite the fear of essentializing, the concept of subjective knowing was elucidated and expanded by further research. Magolda (1991) conducted a study of college students and found that an interpersonal pattern of knowing like connected learning was used more often by women than by men and that impersonal patterns of knowing were used more often by men than women. In her study, students who used interpersonal patterns most often engaged in learning with peers, valued others' ideas, approached problems from a subjective stance and valued individual differences.

The concept of the centrality of relationship led to recommendations that educational programs for women should emphasize collaboration, support, and affiliation (Flannery, 1994). Regan and Brooks (1995) provided support for the concept of connected knowing with a study of women school leaders. They named the process by which these women learned to create relational leadership “relational knowing,” which was collaborative work in which women gathered and created a synergistic environment for everyone in the group.

In 1996, Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy and Belenky explicated insights related to issues and concerns raised about the ways of knowing theories of *WWK*. They edited *Knowledge, Difference and Power: Essays Inspired by Women's Ways of Knowing (KDP)*, in which they and other authors discussed connected knowing and the educational practices that were impacted by their earlier work. The essays in the book made the point that connected learning was a serendipitous discovery that came from comments, not from questions they asked women about connected learning. The authors suggested that separate knowing and connected knowing could exist together, within the same person. KDP included the suggestion that true connected knowing is neither easy nor natural; it's

a procedure that requires work. Belenky et al said that connected knowing has much in common with subjectivism.

Goldberger (1996) wrote “Subjectivity is not unitary, but created by dialogue with varying power relations” (p. 96). She suggested that instead of labeling women as certain kinds of knowers, for instance as a connected knower, that it is better to see particular ways of knowing as strategies that can be acquired and used by all people. Based on their research, Clinchy (1996) suggested that subjective knowers “respect views that differ from their own; they seem to listen and refuse to criticize. They value the sort of knowledge that emerges from first hand experience, and draw on feelings and intuition as sources of information” (p. 221). Clinchy also developed the idea that connected knowing requires sophisticated abilities, and that connected knowers seek out learning communities where they can learn in collaboration and partnership with like-minded knowers.

Tarule (1996) examined classes in which instructors were developing collaborative learning strategies. She found that in truly collaborative classrooms, voice, dialogue, relationships, and learning intersect, and she suggested that analysis of these intersections suggests a shift not only in how knowledge is defined, but also in the role of "expert" in classroom teaching and knowledge construction.

That same year, Debold, Tolman and Brown (1996) provided another reading of *WWK* in which they highlighted how individual women have varied experiences of voice and self that are not fixed and do not develop along a predicable continuum. Their research illustrated how adolescent girls both struggled against and learned to conform to oppressive cultural notions of women’s idealized behavior.



Hayes (2001) explains that learning theorists have begun to explore the social dimensions of learning, arguing that all learning is inextricably intertwined with the context in which it occurs. Crawford (1995) suggests that gendered behaviors and characteristics, or our conceptions of masculinity and femininity, also have been increasingly theorized as products of socially and culturally determined belief systems, rather than rooted in purely psychological or biological sex differences.

Gender relations may also lead women and men to develop different ways of learning. According to Hayes (2001), some theorists suggest that since women have traditionally been in positions of less power than men, women have become more attuned to identifying the feelings and perspectives of others, leading perhaps toward “connected” learning. Hayes suggests that we use conceptions of gendered knowledge systems “to consider how gender might affect the prior knowledge that learners bring to bear on the subject matter of an educational activity, what kind of knowledge they might consider to be important and how they interpret new information” (p. 40).

When theory is applied to practice, collaborative strategies are often included in feminist pedagogy. To take a definition from Hayes and Flannery (2000), “The word *pedagogy* refers to the processes of teaching and learning, whereas *feminist* focuses on women. Thus *feminist pedagogy* refers to the interactive processes of teaching and learning, particularly in relation to what facilitates women’s learning” (p. 155). The authors of *Women as Learners* suggest that feminist pedagogy is about recognizing the gendered nature of human experiences in personal narratives and public stories, about encouraging personal transformation and social transformation. Hayes and Flannery said, “There are many versions of feminist pedagogy, each guided by different theoretical

underpinnings. All versions, building on and reframing the work of Frances Maher and Mary Kay Tetrault (1994) to some extent, include interrelated themes: how knowledge is constructed, voice, authority, identity as shifting, and positionality” p. 156-157).

A definition of feminist pedagogy that I believe are particularly relevant to collaborative learning comes from Crabtree and Sapp (2003), who offer:

We define feminist pedagogy as a set of classrooms practices, teaching strategies, approaches to content and relationships grounded in critical pedagogical and feminist theory. Feminist and other progressive pedagogies consider knowledge as socially constructed, shaped by diverse students with diverse experiences that can lead to diverse solutions to complex social problems. (p. 131-132)

Classroom skills may be tailored to further the goals of feminist pedagogy.

Mayberry’s (1999) research led her to believe that it is important for women students to learn to apply their learning to social action and transformation, which can be best led by feminist educators who develop and use classroom process skills that include collaborative learning environments. She suggested that in feminist pedagogy “great care and skill go into developing a learning environment where students work together to design group activities that demonstrate an awareness of race, class and gender dynamics that permeate the larger society” (p. 7). Mayberry also pointed out that it is important that collaborative learning and feminist pedagogy not be conflated. She suggested that the epistemological basis of collaborative learning prevents any significant discourse about gender, race or class nature of knowledge production and dissemination but feminist pedagogy strives to reveal, understand and transform gender, race, and class domination/oppression.

Collaborative learning that encourages connection and relationship takes the affective as well as rational and cognitive modes of learning into account. Digiovanni

(2004) posits that feminist pedagogy helps counterweigh the hidden curriculum that diminishes women. She encouraged feminist classroom techniques that include having students sit in small groups and hands-on, cooperative, discussion-based classroom activities.

Cranton (1996) has distinguished three kinds of group learning—cooperative, collaborative and transformative. She equates cooperative learning with instrumental learning and task accomplishment.

In this section of literature, I explored the ways research about women's ways of learning has influenced collaborative learning techniques for women. Hayes (2001) suggests that the understanding of gender as a type of social relationship requires us to question generalizations and assumptions about women's learning. She writes, "By using gender (in combination with other influential factors such as race and class) as a lens for understanding why learners may have some kinds of knowledge and not others, why they have some interests and not others, we gain more insight into appropriate instructional approaches and ways of presenting subject matter" (p. 40). Hayes and Flannery (2000) also caution:

There are some potential dangers in studying women's learning. One danger is that such work can lead to assertions that certain attributes or qualities of women's learning are innate, fixed, and uniform across situations ("essential" attributes of women) rather than integrally connected to a particular set of situational, social and historical circumstances, and thus changeable as those circumstances change. This essentialism is most often apparent in scholarship that remains at a purely descriptive level, making broad generalizations about how women prefer to learn or their learning behavior, without putting their learning into context or probing more deeply into why women might express such preferences or act in such ways. (p. 218)

In this study, I am interested in exploring and trying to understand the subject of women's learning as a distinctive experience. Because of the efforts of scholars, researchers and authors who cared deeply about women's learning (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Gilligan, 1982; Hayes & Flannery, 2000; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Maher & Tetreault, 1994) and others, there is solid recognition that women's learning is unique and worthy of investigation. The way women learn in collaborative settings particularly lends itself to examination.

### Collaborative Learning

This section examines current research about collaborative learning. Included are definitions; discussions about collaborative learning as applied to women, students of color, faculty, and faculty of color; problems that are related to collaborative education and gaps in knowledge that could bear further research.

Collaborative learning is defined, at its most basic, is a group of two or more people who work together interdependently on an agreed-upon activity or goal (Keyton, 2006). There are many other ways to delineate collaborative learning. Primarily the term is applied to small groups of students working together. Barkley, Cross and Major (2005) wrote, "Collaborative learning assumes that knowledge is socially produced by consensus among knowledgeable peers as students work in pairs or small groups to achieve shared learning goals" (p. 6). They reason that collaborative learning has three aspects: intentional design, all participants working toward a stated objective, and meaningful learning taking place.

Bruffee (1993) is an ardent advocate of collaborative learning and has written that the definition of collaborative learning includes the caveat that students do not become

dependent on the teacher as the authority on either subject matter content or group process. He contends that it is important in collaborative learning that the teacher, along with the students, becomes a member of a community in search of knowledge. Bruffee believes that the goal of collaborative learning is to develop autonomous, articulate, thinking people, “even if at times such a goal encourages dissent and competition that seems to undercut the ideals of competitive learning” (p. 15).

The definition of collaborative learning also includes the idea that the process is not just designed to help students memorize existing facts and figures. Peters and Armstrong (1998) contend that collaborative learning means that people labor together to construct something that did not exist before the collaboration: “Once the talk is talked and interpretations are made, the context changes, the meaning of previously spoken words change, and the collaborators can’t go home again” (p. 76). The meaning that is developed, as fluid as it is in a collaborative learning experience, is group meaning, something other than the individual interpretations of what the group has constructed.

As I discussed in the Background to the Study, Chapter I, generally the term “collaborative learning” is used in higher education and “cooperative learning” is used in K-12 education. However, Astin’s (1993) large-scale statistical study which included hundreds of colleges and thousands of students uses the terms *cooperative* and *collaborative* interchangeably. He concluded:

Research has consistently shown that cooperative-learning approaches produce outcomes that are superior to those obtained through traditional competitive approaches and it may well be that our findings concerning the power of the peer group offer a possible explanation: cooperative learning may be more potent than traditional methods of pedagogy because it motivates students to become more active and more involved participants in the learning process. (p. 427)

Some college instructors believe students may not want to engage in small group learning, but there are so many benefits that this style of teaching is necessary. Nagle (2002) explained:

Many students dislike small-group work, in part because it disrupts their rhythms and requires them to get intimate with difficult reading. I used to ask if they wanted to break into groups, but after the first time, they always said no, so I stopped giving them the choice. I have found no method as successful for getting students to do a close analysis of readings, and without fail they bring back more and deeper insights into the material than I could give them or elicit from through a lecture. (p. 320)

The results of the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement reveal that students who take part in collaborative and distance learning and who interact with faculty receive better grades, are more satisfied with education and are more likely to stay in college. The benefits of collaborative learning appeared to be even greater for minority or academically unprepared college students (Wasley, 2006).

In this study, I am interested in collaborative learning in higher education settings. As more and more faculty members are attempting to change the paradigms of university classes from a strategy of competitiveness to one of collaboration, it is important to explore the research related to collaborative learning and college classrooms.

### Women and Collaborative Learning

According to Barkley et al, (2005), “In many college classrooms, students spend a significant amount time of passively listening to the ‘sage on the stage’ and are expected not to talk because this distracts attention that is supposed to be focused on the instructor” (p. 30). But the face of education is changing, just as surely as the faces in the classrooms have changed. As more diverse students and faculty members have moved into the lecture halls, different techniques for delivering information have moved into colleges

with them. Collaborative learning techniques are incorporated into many classes, and even faculty who teach large lecture classes are finding new ways to deliver their lessons (Stanley & Porter, 2002).

Collard and Stalker (1991) wrote that women learners often find that traditional educational practices demand their progress toward thinking, reading, writing, and talking “like a man.” That is, while acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to demonstrate their intellectual abilities, women may have to de-feminize their ways of knowing and become distinct from their preferred, female ways of learning. In doing so, Collard and Stalker suggested, women may become denatured, and depart from the socially sanctioned norms of what it is to be a woman. They wrote that while traditional classrooms with hierarchical structure may have a denaturing effect, collaborative learning, with a structure that is antithetical to traditional classes, may have a positive effect for female students.

Magolda’s (1991) longitudinal study of 100 college students in 1991 found that an interpersonal pattern of knowing, comparable to connected learning, was used more often by women than men and that impersonal patterns of knowing were used more often by men than women. Further, students who used interpersonal patterns engaged in learning with peers, valued others’ ideas, approached problems from a subjective stance, and valued individual differences.

Barkley, Cross and Major (2005) believe that one of the reasons collaborative learning has become so topical is that colleges and universities want to appear as if they are providing greater opportunity for a wider variety of students to develop as lifelong learners.

Sandler, Silverberg and Hall (1996 ) suggested that the incongruence of the female learning style with the prevailing educational climate, which might be a better fit for men, lies at the heart of the chilly classroom climate that diminishes the academic performance of women.

Salter and Persaud (2003) tested female students' affinity for collaborative learning using the Myers-Briggs instrument, which divides participants by scores into extroversion-introversion, sensing-intuition, thinking-feeling, and judgment-perception. Of the 40 percent of people in the general population who score as thinkers, 31 percent were women. Of the 60 percent who score as feelers, the majority, 64 percent, were women (translation: 12 percent were female thinkers, 38 percent were female feelers). Feelers rely on networks of relationships or connectiveness, and high levels of emotional support and group cohesion. A feeler is the type of relational person who might prefer collaborative group learning. Thinkers rely on central, depersonalized truth or science, high levels of control and work pressure. Thinking classrooms were found to inhibit class participation and were characterized by women in the study as being anxiety producing, competitive and even hostile in some instances (Daniel W. Salter & Persaud, 2003).

Salter (2003) write of his research that "the results seemed to support a contention that learning style might be an important consideration to understanding gender differences and that some women have different experiences than some men. Behavioral environments that value people as people and collaborative relationships would seem to be especially good for feeling women" (p. 21).



## Gender Diversity and Leadership

According to Keyton (2006), group leadership is one area in which gender stereotypes are abundant. She writes, “In mixed-sex groups, we frequently expect that males will emerge as leaders of groups, but this is not always the case. Females are more likely to emerge as leaders when groups deal with relational issues. Males are more likely to emerge as leaders when groups deal with task issues” (p. 226-227).

In *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender and Culture*, Wood (2003) addresses the cultural view that men are standard or normative throughout institutional life in the United States and that leadership is typically linked with masculine modes of communication. In her textbook, Wood discusses gendered speech communities that divide along the lines of gender and communication. Even in children’s games, Wood explains, there are differences in communication by gender. Boys’ games include the unwritten rules that communication is used to be assertive, to attract and maintain an audience and to compete with others. Girls’ games include the unstated rules that communication is used to create and maintain relationships and to respond to others feelings sensitively, and that communication is not used for criticizing or putting others down. She states that there is bias against “feminine” forms of communication, including skills in collaboration in schools and the workplace. Wood suggests that as men and women enter into new settings and take on new roles, they reform their identities and communication patterns to reflect and respond to the norms and requirements of their contexts. Wood adds that studies of mixed-sex task groups show that men and women may feel awkward initially when they work together but they overcome that in a short time.

In addition, Wood said:

Not only are mixed-sex groups not disruptive to productivity, they actually may enhance the quality of much decision making. Researchers suspect that when women and men are together, each contributes in important ways to high-quality decision making. Women may specialize in communication that supports and builds team cohesion and men may initiate more communication focused on logistics of the task. (pp. 241-242)

This is an area I will address in depth in Chapter IV of this study.

Once the leader role is established, behavior for male and female leaders differs only very slightly, according to Chemers & Murphy (1995). Of all the differences that could exist between male and female leaders, one has been demonstrated in literature about collaborative leaders. Females are more likely to adopt a democratic or participative style of leadership and male leaders prefer an autocratic or directive style (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Ridgeway, 2001).

Thus far in this discussion of women and collaborative learning, I have sampled literature that examines general thinking about this approach to learning and the way it has been viewed as having a positive impact on women. Because one of the assumptions is that collaborative learning might also positively impact students of color, I next discuss some studies about attitudes of students of color. Then I briefly discuss the authority of faculty in collaborative learning situations, and follow that with some literature on the struggle faculty of color have with authority in collaborative learning.

#### Students of Color

A study of over 2,000 college students indicates that men and women were equally likely to prefer collaborative learning, while minorities, regardless of gender, were more predisposed toward collaborative learning than Whites (Cabrera, Crissman, & Bernal, 2002). Collaborative learning situations may be advantageous for students of

color who are holders and creators of knowledge but often feel as if their histories, experiences, cultures and languages are devalued, misinterpreted, or omitted within formal educational settings (Bernal, 2002).

A qualitative study of Black undergraduate students was conducted at the University of Delaware by Kraft (1991). She asked students to rank what they thought led to their success in the university. Students who had taken courses where working in a group was required described the availability of other students to study with as an essential to academic success. Engineering students stressed the importance of study groups for tutoring help, division of labor and emotional encouragement. On the other hand, students who were one of a few or the only Black student in a class said they had the experience of ending up alone when the class was told to break up into groups for an assignment. In classes where group participation was the norm, not being able to readily find a group to work with was a major disadvantage.

Despite those reservations, there are those scholars who suggest that the historic origins of collaborative learning connect Black students to education. Some of the research refers to traditional teaching as “Eurocentric” and collaborative-style teaching as “Africentric.” In a study of critical practice in adult education, Hunn (2004) writes “When traditional Eurocentric teaching and power come together, oppression is the result” (p. 66). She lists scholars who have characterized Eurocentricism as controlling, emotionally distant, rational and linear (Carruthers, 1999; Colin & Guy, 1998). Hunn’s definition of Africentric includes interdependency, interconnectedness, spirituality, human centeredness, and harmony, all elements that she feels are an intrinsic part of collaborative learning. Because of the connectedness at the heart of Africentrism,

communal or person-to-person perspective is important. Hunn (2004) suggests that students would be accountable to themselves, to each other and the instructor; that group work and community projects would enhance the feeling of equality and link the project of learning to the collective group of learners and would make the outcome the community's concerns. Hunn (2004) feels that African American learners who would not feel safe sharing ideas because they feel alienated in traditional classroom would have their experiences validated in collaborative groups.

In traditional classroom situations where men are perceived as dominant, non-native speakers of English may be too intimidated to risk active participation. Furthermore, women whose native language is not English may repress their voice because of cultural patterns, according to L. Gajdusek and J. Gillote (1995). In that case, group collaborative work may be assigned to help shift the responsibility for discovering and creating knowledge from the teacher back to groups and individual learners. Sometimes even small groups turn out to be difficult for women in cross-cultural contexts. "Women in small groups may face the additional burden of the more competitive, dominating, and at least superficially, self-confident behavior of some (it only takes one) man in the group. In short, these women may be disadvantaged several times over: by language, by skin color, by economic status, by a lack of access to the forms of academic discourse, and by gender" (Gajdusek & Gillote, 1995, p. 51).

#### Faculty and Collaborative Learning

The unequal distribution of power and authority in a group can profoundly influence the direction of decision making and knowledge construction. The involvement of a teacher in a collaborative learning group can have several different outcomes,

depending on how the teacher is seen by students in terms of her authority as teacher, as subject matter expert and as leader of the group. Unless the teacher sees herself as a co-creator of knowledge and acts on that perception, she is likely to be seen by students as the primary source of knowledge and thus their own role in knowledge construction would be limited to interpreting whatever the teacher says (Peters & Armstrong, 1998).

According to Peters (1998), the collaborative form of teaching is distinguished not only by a focus on joint construction of knowledge, but also by the designation of the teacher as a member of the group of learners and by the role of the group in the learning experience. The teacher may and usually does have special knowledge of content, but her knowledge does not necessarily supersede that of the other learners in the group. The teacher usually will have special knowledge of and skills as a facilitator of collaborative learning. Students often come to class with their own assumptions about how teachers are supposed to act, how learners are supposed to learn, and how knowledge is made, and they may have to get over those assumptions before they can get the most out of collaborative learning.

Rodriguez (1999) explains that although the National Science Education Standards on ethnicity suggest that teachers should use student-centered and collaborative styles of teaching, some teachers can be reluctant to change their ways. Rodriguez said that some of his students have said, "If women and minorities want to be successful in science, then they are just going to have to work as hard as White males" (p. 6).

Rodriguez (1999) writes that he tries to enhance use of collaboration, but social factors such as trust, power and school culture and institutional issues such as curriculum

demands, time constraints, university expectations and pupil ability worked against the desire to implement innovative or constructivist approaches.

#### Faculty of Color

If we are hesitant to apply a broad brush to women's learning, we should be doubly cautious before we recommend collaborative learning for female faculty of color and other members of minority cultures. Lee and Johnson-Bailey (2004) write: "We suggest that no one-size-fits-all feminist pedagogy exists and that feminist pedagogy and women of color can make for a dangerous liaison" (p. 14). The two professors say they never rely on using collaboration as the primary strategy but engage students through a combination of methods, including lecture. Additionally, they monitor their discussion closely and engage silent members, especially women and minorities, to voice their opinions.

Even though it may not be easy to move from hierarchical styles of teaching to more collaborative styles, most women who are faculty of color recognize the need for change. hooks (1994) called for transformation in the classrooms: "The change in how we teach and what we teach, has been a necessary revolution, one that seeks to restore life to a corrupt and dying academy" (pp. 29-30).

Dillard (2000) suggests that African-American women may have mixed views of collaborative learning: "Only within the context of community does the individual appear, and through dialogue, continue to become. This endarkened feminist epistemological assumption assumes...there is value in being connected, in seeking harmony and wholeness as a way to discern 'truth.' While most feminist scholars would recognize and subscribe to at least some common experiences based in culturally

engendered experiences of being female, the experiences are qualitatively different for those who stand outside the circle of ‘acceptable’ women, most particularly African-American women” (p. 673).

Teaching students to learn and work collaboratively is complicated by struggles faculty women who are Black may have. The traditional purveyors of ideas in Western society are White and male. In the academy this is especially true, given that only 4.5 percent of all faculty positions are held by women of color with African American women representing less than 1 percent of college faculty (Bowman, Kite, Branscombe, and Williams, 2000). The 2000 National Center for Educational Statistics shows that at predominantly White colleges and universities African American faculty members represent only 2.3 percent of the faculties (Stanley, 2007).

Brown, Cervero and Johnson-Bailey (2000) suggest that it is not enough to say to educators of color, “Be credible when facilitating adult learning,” because the race and gender of the teacher influences the students’ perception of the teacher’s credibility. A study of how the societal position of African American women affects their experiences when teaching mathematics to adults in postsecondary institutions shows that race and gender directly affected their classroom interactions and teaching strategies (Brown, Cervero, & Johnson-Bailey, 2000). According to Rakow (1991), there may be dissonance when an African American woman enters a classroom because she may not be perceived as competent as the universal teacher, who is White and male, not African American and female.

Nor does Apps’ 1991 proposal that enthusiasm, caring for others, ability to listen and knowledge of the subject matter will transcend most teaching situations, apply to all

teachers. In the Brown, Cervero and Johnson-Bailey (2000) study, these teaching characteristics were not enough to transcend the students' perception of the African American adult educators. This perception and experience of these educators may get in the way of students and faculty achieving mutuality, which might make students resistant to learning in those classes.

Dillard (2000) adds that although feminist literature embraces the notion of the ideal classroom as a refuge for all students and as a site of caring, women of color see the concepts of safety and caring as troubling: "We maintain that the classroom is rarely a safe space for women of color, as students or teachers, because the classroom is merely a microcosm of our larger society. Furthermore, we believe that when the Other is the teacher, the class environment can become a contested terrain where teacher and students sometimes battle for voice" (Dillard, p. 673).

Peters and Armstrong (1998) reason that sometimes students in collaborative classes may be frustrated with the methodology and suspect that the teacher lacks competence in her subject matter. This is especially difficult for women of color who feel they must establish themselves as authorities to win the respect of the class. Expectations of a traditional class format can easily delay or even prevent the collaborative learning experience, leaving women of color who practice feminist pedagogies conflicted (Lee and Johnson-Bailey, 2004).

### Problems in Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning, viewed as a positive trend in education, is not without problems. The following section underscores how further research is warranted to determine what the problems are and how they are best surmounted.



In Marsick and Kasl's (1997) research, there is the suggestion that America's tradition of valuing individualism creates habits of mind that make it challenging for students to learn to work and learn collaboratively. Their research indicates that the tension between learning for its own sake versus productivity may make it difficult for group members to step outside of results orientation long enough to truly collaborate. This may stem from the feeling that group work implies a loss of individual control (King & Behnke, 2005).

Student dissention includes complaints that group grades are unfair, debase grade reports, undermine motivation, convey incorrect messages, violate individual accountability, generate resistant to cooperative learning and often are challenged in court (Kagan, 1995, 1996). Pitt (2000) concluded that students' desires to receive the highest individual grades are often at odds with collaborative learning. Problems with group grades include: any method of selecting groups gives some groups an advantage and some a disadvantage; giving all students the same grades means weaker students contribute less for the same grade; teamwork is hard to assess; rating on performance has as much to do with perception as performance; some assessment factors promote dishonesty and competition.

A common problem in collaborative learning situations is the failure of the group to work effectively together. This might arise because the students lack the very transferable skills which the process of group work is intended to teach. One possible solution is careful construction of the groups. If the teacher can choose individuals who are compatible and will work well together, they will succeed in the group task and hopefully develop skills in the process.

According to Huxham and Land (2000) three methods of assigning students are available: allowing students to choose their own groups, allocating students to groups randomly (or arbitrarily, for example according to alphabetical listings), or attempting to engineer groups according to personal characteristics, such as personality, past achievement, gender, race or personal skills. Most published advice recommends the last method but the first two are most often used. Blowers (2000) notes that common methods for selecting groups are often ineffective and he suggests using a student self-assessment method to sort students into groups.

A separate study I conducted leads me to believe that there is not a significant difference in the peer ratings of group members who select their own members and those who do not select their own members. However, the scores given the final presentations by independent adjudicators showed students who chose their own group mates received nine to 18 points higher than those who did not select their members. I have had good results when I pick the group leaders and let them chose their group members.

Will (1997) is a proponent of group work, but adds that some adult learners are resistant to small-group learning: “Busy professionals may resent the time required for group process. People who have had bad experiences with group learning may be reluctant to join in again. Typical complaints include uneven participation (the dominant member, the silent member), poorly defined tasks, no closure or follow-up” (p. 35). Will adds that in her experience, such problems can be minimized by careful attention to the process of group learning, allowing time for introductions, explanations, questions and debriefing.

Some groups fail for lack of clear guidelines and expectations. Will (1997) suggests that a rubric, broadly stated goals, explicit task descriptions and end results will help group members understand how they will be held responsible for their work.

One of the most important points for my study is also from Will (1997), who suggests: “It is a mistake to assume that people know how to interact effectively in groups. Cooperation is not an innate human quality. The facilitator should provide an overview of the behaviors supportive of group learning. Basic ground rules would include these: reserve judgment, listen and offer feedback to one another, be willing to take risks and venture new ideas, encourage all members to speak and to participate, and view conflicts—if they emerge—as opportunities for learning” (p. 36).

Typical communication problems in collaborative learning are interruptions, digressions, the domination of discussion by one individual, and difficulty getting to the point. Some social problems may include personality conflicts, competition between members, the hostile participant or non-participant, the advocacy of one point of view to the exclusion of all others, and inappropriate humor or behavior (McCartney, 1990).

There are some problems that seem to be implicit to group learning. One is the complaint by females that they are the “last chosen” for groups. Several strategies are available that will help facilitators figure out how to group students without reverting to the old schoolyard choice system that leaves some students standing on the sidelines (Huxham & Land, 2000).

Another complaint is that slackers ride on the group work and high-achievers carry the load. The phenomenon that people work harder alone than when in a group is called *social loafing* (Karau & Williams, 1993). Spatz (2005) asked the question, “Do we

work harder when we are part of a group or when we are alone?” This is one of the questions I asked 48 students in a survey taken by both men and women at a mid-sized Texas university. Their answers are in Chapter IV.

Lotan (2003) feels that the rewards of collaborative learning are substantial, but most educators do not understand the crucial design elements needed for successful group tasks. Lotan writes, “Some students who easily complete tasks designed for individuals may refuse to devote time and energy to building group cohesiveness or group consensus; others may openly resist making their grades dependent on the efforts (or lack thereof) of other members of their group. The teacher, therefore, must deliberately and carefully craft learning tasks that are ‘group-worthy’” (p. 72).

The disadvantages listed by students included recognition that people need to go at different speeds, that some students dominate the group while others are “easy riders” who fail to pull their fair share, that discussion gets off the topic and wastes time, and that some groups “just don’t get along” (Lotan, 2003, p. 23).

### Gaps in the Literature

Cafferella and Olson (1993) suggest that alternative designs and methods should be employed to expand the knowledge base about psychosocial development of women. Acknowledging that there is not one “woman” but many “women,” points to the gap in literature about collaborative learning, one that I explore in my study.

The use of collaborative learning techniques is increasing in university and adult education classrooms. The ability to work collaboratively has become increasingly important, both in classrooms and in the workplace. Previous research indicates that women tend to be more collaborative than men, and therefore, respond better to group

activities but other findings suggest that generalizing leads to mistaken assumptions about how women learn. Gaps in the literature indicate there is room for a qualitative study of how women specifically negotiate collaborative learning in higher education.

### CHAPTER III

#### METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the study is to explore women's experiences as they negotiate collaborative group projects in a college course.. This chapter focuses on the methodology used. First, I present a discussion of qualitative research and the reason it was chosen for this study. The chapter then includes a description of participant selection and data collection and concludes with the methods used to analyze the data.

#### Qualitative Research

A qualitative research design was chosen for this study because it is especially well suited for investigations where it is desirable to improve practice and develop theory (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Qualitative research has the philosophical assumption that individuals interacting with their social worlds construct reality. This specifically fits my study because as Merriam and Simpson (2000) explained, "The key philosophical assumption in qualitative research is that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds; that it is ever-changing and multidimensional, not a single, fixed objective phenomena waiting to be discovered, observed and measured" (p. 97).

Merriam (1998) points out that in contrast to quantitative research, which takes apart a phenomenon to examine component parts, qualitative research can reveal how all the parts work together to form a whole. This specifically suits my study of how the parts of collaborative learning work together to form way of learning that women negotiate during their time as university students.

Second, the findings of qualitative research are comprehensive, holistic, expansive and richly descriptive. Lincoln and Guba (1985) list the characteristics of

qualitative, naturalistic research as: (1) carried out in natural settings because those studied “take their meaning as much from their contexts as they do from themselves” (p. 189); (2) The researcher is the human instrument, responsive and flexible; (3) A purposive sampling allows a variety of realities to be included; and (4) Inductive data analysis is more likely to uncover multiple realities.

My research fits Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria for qualitative research because I have endeavored to bring all four of these characteristics to this study of how women negotiate collaborative learning.

First, it was carried out in a *natural setting*, the university the students attend. There are three aspects to the research, a survey, observation and in-depth interviews. The surveys were conducted in the Department of Communication computer lab where the students frequently work in small groups on collaborative projects. The anonymous and optional surveys were answered by 48 students in three advertising classes in the Department of Communication. The format was open-ended and the only quantitative data requested was demographic. To conduct the observations, I attended eight sessions of Fall 2007 COM 315 Small Group Communication while Dr. Parker (a pseudonym used to identify her) conducted the classes. I did not interact with the 18 students or the professor as they participated in the class, but stayed on the periphery of the room. The private, in-depth interviews with the women were conducted in my office based on the needs of their schedules. Although none of the women are my students, they are familiar with the location of my office in the same building as their classroom. In the report on the interviews and surveys, findings are in the participants’ own words, so it is possible to understand, in part, how the students see the world.

Second, in the observations and in-depth interviews I was the *human instrument*, responsive and flexible and able to grasp the experiences and the setting. I was able to process the words of the participants immediately so I could ask for clarification or expansion. I agree with Lincoln and Guba (1985) that I am closer to reality as the primary instrument in qualitative research than if a data collection instrument is interjected between the participants and me.

Third, the research was conducted on a *purposive sampling* of participants who meet specific criteria because it allows a variety of realities to be included. The university students were chosen because they experience a variety of collaborative learning assignments in the Department of Communication in the College of Liberal and Applied Arts at a mid-sized Texas university. The women in Dr. Parker's Small Group Communication course were taking a class specifically designed to expose them to collaborative learning techniques and hands-on activities. I observed both male and female students as they negotiated the class but chose to interview only the women. Qualitative research allowed me to study the respondents in depth. Stalker (2001) notes that the qualitative approach is ideal to uncover the subtleties of the respondents' views, to reveal hidden assumptions, and to probe for deeper meanings. In the observation and interviews, a small nonrandom sample was selected precisely because I wanted to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Merriam (1998) suggests that the qualitative researcher must have tolerance for ambiguity because there are no set procedures or protocols that can be followed step by step. She cites sensitivity as an important attribute, because the researcher must be sensitive to context and all the variables in it. Finally, she suggests



that a qualitative researcher must be a good communicator, who can empathize with the respondents, establish rapport, ask good questions and listen intently.

Fourth, inductive data analysis is used in the study. I approached the study “without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis, contributing to the depth, openness and detail of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 14). According to Schwandt (2001), inductive reasoning, typical in social scientific inquiry, relies on “the principle of enumeration to reach a general conclusion about a group or class of individuals or events from observations of a specific set of individuals or events” (p. 126).

#### Data Collection

First, a general survey about collaborative learning was given to 48 male and female students in three advertising classes at a mid-sized Texas university. The classes were chosen because of the preponderance of small group projects they do in the study of advertising. The general survey about collaborative learning was conducted in the computer lab in the Department of Communication. It was an anonymous, optional survey that asked open-ended classes about attitudes toward group work, learning, and involvement.

The second phase of the study focused on 18 students who were taking the university Fall 2007 COM 315 Small Group Communication class. Dr. Parker allowed me to observe the students in her class. I attended eight sessions of the fifteen week class and followed the students from the early days of the class through to the completion of their group projects. There were 18 students in the class, all of whom were either juniors or seniors. There were seven women in the class.

The students all agreed to be observed during their class sessions. I attended and observed them in eight class sessions. Course syllabi and class data sheets were used to plan observations and understand the focus of each class session. I stayed on the periphery of the room and did not interact with the 18 students or the professor as they participated in the class.

I took notes during the classes, and wrote down conversations I heard and activities I observed. I moved around the room, stopping by each group for some part of the class period. If there was something particularly interesting happening in a group, I moved close to those students. Merriam (1998) notes that outside observers notice things that have become routine to the participants that can lead to understanding the context. I found the observations particularly useful to provide specific incidents and behaviors that I could use as reference points in the in-depth interviews.

I conducted three out-of-class individual interviews with six of the seven women. I asked open-ended questions and allowed the women time to answer fully. The private, in-depth interviews with the women were conducted in my office based on the needs of their schedules. Although none of the women were my students, they were familiar with the location of my office which is in the same building as their classroom. All of the women allowed the in-depth sessions to be recorded. The interviews were recorded and transcribed and analyzed.

Merriam (1998) details the different types of interview by showing that highly structured interviews and unstructured interviews are at two ends of a continuum. The most structured interview is an oral form of the written survey. The less structured form of the survey can be used “when the researcher does not know enough about a

phenomenon to ask relevant questions” (p. 75). I used the format Merriam calls *less structured*. I prepared a list of questions that covered the issues I wanted to explore but I was guided by the responses of the women for the exact wording, the order of the questions, and even whether some questions would be included in each individual interview. I heeded Merriam’s (1998) warning to use words that made sense to the participants, and I avoided technical jargon and terms and concepts from my educational orientation.

All of the sessions were recorded using a digital recorder along with an external microphone on a stand. The clarity of the recordings was very good, which helped in transcription. The digital playback made it easy to transcribe every word of the interviews, and I was able to clearly hear nuances in the women’s answers.

All of the women answered the first section of initial questions regarding information such as age, grade point average, number of people in their family and where they were from. Six of the women returned for private in-depth interviews that lasted from 60-90 minutes, loosely based on the questions I had devised about how they learned, about their school experience related to learning and how they felt about working in groups. A final interview was conducted with the women toward the end of the class to see how their perceptions of the class and of collaborative learning might have changed and what they felt about how they negotiated the learning process.

### Data Analysis

The surveys were compiled by grouping the answers according to the questions to which they corresponded. I created figures that show the gender and ethnicity of the

participants and the responses to the questions “Do you learn as much in a group as alone?” and “Do you work as hard in a group as alone?”

I became immersed in the data during the interviews and the transcription phase. I was able to be responsive to what the women said and notice issues that needed to be explored further. According to Patton (2002, p. 380), “Data interpretation and analysis involve making sense out of what people have said, looking for patterns, putting together what is said in one place with what is said in another place, and integrating what different people have said.” To analyze the interviews with the six university women, I used the four stages delineated by Merriam and Simpson (2000), who suggest this method is particularly well suited to investigating problems for which substantive theory might arise as an end result of analyzing the data.

In the first stage, I coded the incidents, compared and generated tentative categories and properties. In the second stage, I integrated categories and their properties. In the third stage, I reduced similar categories to a smaller number of highly conceptual categories. In the fourth stage I wrote my interpretation of the data.

I first analyzed the transcripts by writing key words in the margin. Then I looked for common threads among the themes and put them into categories. Information from documents such as syllabi and data sheets as well as my notes from observations were added. I integrated the observations and the interviews together and related the topic each woman discussed in the interview to the subject that was discussed in class. In that way, I was able to coordinate the responses to the classes I observed and get a more complete picture of the women as they negotiated the different stages of collaborative learning.

Chapter IV presents the findings from the surveys, observations and interviews.

## Trustworthiness

The four criteria of trustworthiness in qualitative research, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

### *Credibility*

Credibility is the believability of findings, or the idea that data included in the study represents the authentic meanings of the study participants from their points of view. Techniques that advance credibility are triangulation, peer debriefing, referential adequacy and member checking.

Triangulation for this paper includes the use of multiple sources, methods and theories. I surveyed 48 people, observed eight sessions of a class and interviewing six women. The women were interviewed three times, and there were follow-up conversations to clarify points and to allow them an opportunity for comment. Methodological triangulation occurred by observation of procedures and use of the course syllabi and data sheets from the Small Group Communication course. Investigator triangulation occurred by using other individuals to review the data.

Referential adequacy involves making digital recordings of all the interviews so that they can be examined and compared to the interpretations and direct quotations that are being developed from the data. Such recording serves as a way to check for accuracy and will be saved for at least a year after the study is finished. Obviously privacy of the participants is considered to be of foremost importance.

Member checks establish credibility by allowing participants to verify information, expand on the original interviews and provide a record of their agreement.

In this study, transcripts were emailed to participants to review. They were given the opportunity to correct errors and offer additional insight.

### *Transferability*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain that potential appliers will make transferability judgments, not the qualitative researcher. However, in order to make transferability possible, I have utilized purposeful sampling, thick descriptions of the participants, and extensive data from the survey, observations and interviews. The audit trail consists of filled-out surveys, notes from the class sessions, digital recordings, transcriptions and materials from classes. I would be glad to supply supporting materials to help researchers determine whether the results of this study would apply to their work.

### *Dependability*

Dependability, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), refers to whether the process of the study is consistent and stable over time and across researchers and methods. They point out that if credibility has been established, then dependability can be assumed. Triangulation, peer debriefing, referential adequacy and member checking can be used to demonstrate dependability because of credibility.

### *Confirmability*

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that confirmability refers to the degree to which the results could be confirmed by other researchers. Although I am not sure any two researchers would reach exactly the same conclusions even while looking at exactly the same data at the same time, I submit that by following the audit trail and using similar

methods, researchers would find that women at this time in history in this setting of a college classroom share a commonality in how they negotiate collaborative learning.

### Participant Selection

Participants for this study were selected from a purposeful sample of students in a university. Merriam (1998) explains that purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned. By selecting information-rich cases to sample, the researcher can learn about the issues that are of central importance to the research (Patton, 2002).

I approached purposive sampling by determining the selection criteria that is essential for my study. In criterion-based selection the researcher creates a list of the attributes essential and then proceeds to find or locate a unit matching the list (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993). The type of purposeful sampling I chose is *typical*, because “the site was specifically selected because it is not in any major way atypical, extreme, deviant or intensely unusual” (Patton, 2002, p. 173).

For this study, I determined that a purposeful sampling would consist of university students who had taken classes in which collaborative learning techniques were used. I used three different samples of the university population: (1) an open-ended sample of 48 male and female students in three advertising classes (2) Observation of 18 male and female students in a Small Group Communication class and (3) in-depth interviews with six women in the Small Group Communication class.

The survey was answered by 48 male and female students who were attending the university and have been a part of classes that included group work. They were students

in three advertising classes and took the open-ended surveys about collaborative learning in a computer lab during their advertising classes. They used the computers to answer the surveys and turned them in during their class periods.

For the observations, I chose to attend a class in which collaborative learning techniques were incorporated into the fabric of the curriculum. In addition, I chose a class in which there would be a grade earned for a major collaborative task. That grade would have to be an important part of each student's individual class grade. I observed all of the 18 men and women in the class, but concentrated my findings on the ways the women negotiated the group activities.

For the in-depth interviews, I interviewed six women who were in the Small Group Communication class about their specific activities in the class as well as their early learning as children, their learning styles, their educational history and other experiences they have had in collaborative learning.

The site selection was a mid-sized Texas university where I have taught in the Department of Communication since 2002. I chose this site not only because it is convenient but because it is where I first became interested in collaborative learning and noticed that responses to collaborative learning of female students were not what I expected and seemed to differ in significant ways from responses of the male students.

All students in the study attended this mid-sized Texas university in East Texas between Dallas and Houston near the Louisiana border. The most recent university census was taken in fall 2006, and it showed that there were 11,756 students, of whom 7,107 were female and 4,649 were male. Of those, 3,424 were freshmen, 1,862 were sophomores, 2,427 were juniors and 2,445 were seniors. The balance was graduate



students. Sixty percent of the students came from Harris, Nacogdoches, Angelina, and Dallas counties. There were 2,174 students 18 and under; 4,575 ages 19-21; 2,462 ages 22-24; 1,186 ages 25-30 and 1,359 ages 31 and up. The percentage of enrollment by ethnicity was 76.9 percent White, 14.7 percent African American, 6 percent Hispanic, and just over 2 percent American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander and other ethnicities.

The study was done in the Department of Communication, which is in the College of Liberal and Applied Arts. In Spring 2008, there were 222 students majoring or minoring in Radio/TV, 194 in Journalism, which includes news writing, advertising, photojournalism and public relations, and 159 in Communication Studies, which includes speech and interpersonal communication. The average grade point is 2.37 in R/TV, 2.44 in Journalism and 2.47 in Communication Studies. Fifty-five percent of the major and minor students are female. (In contrast, the College of Science and Math is 48 percent female.)

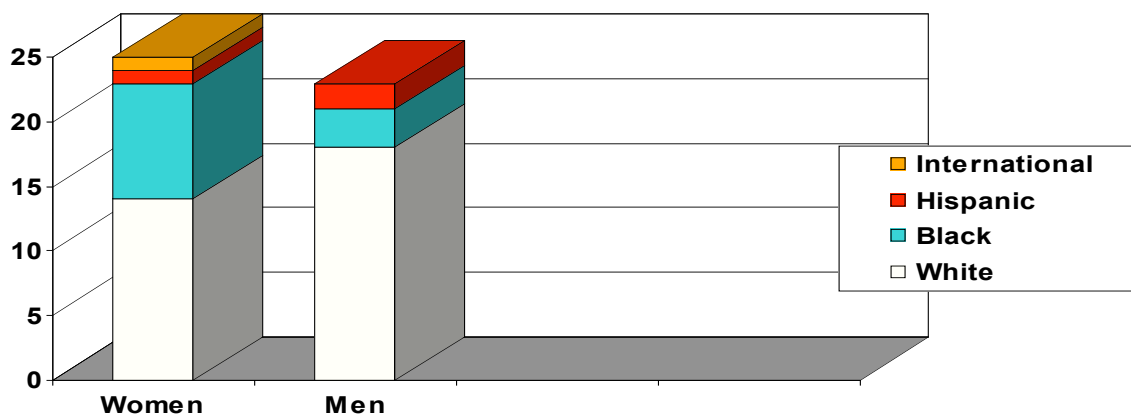
Selection of participants was based on the following criteria:

1. Students included in the observations and in-depth interviews were enrolled in COM 315 Small Group Communication at a mid-sized Texas university.
2. For the in-depth interviews, all participants were female. See the figure on p. 61 for a breakdown of information about the women.
3. Participants were 20 years of age or older.
4. Participants were currently enrolled in classes at a mid-sized Texas university.

5. Participants had been students in classes which used collaborative techniques.
6. Participants in the anonymous, optional surveys were students in three advertising classes in the Department of Communication.
7. Participants in observation and/or interviews were not students in my classes at the time of the observation or interviews.
8. For the general survey and class observation, participants were included regardless of gender.

### Profiles of the Participants

Forty-eight students, made up of 25 women and 23 men, answered the open-ended survey about collaborative learning. As seen in Figure 1, 14 women and 18 men were White, 9 women and three men were African American, one woman and two men were Hispanic. One woman was an international student from Sweden. All were students in three advertising classes at the university and they answered the survey in a computer lab during their advertising classes.



*Figure 1.* Participants in the general survey by gender and ethnicity.

*Table 1.* A chart of the women in the Small Group Communication class. Answers include whether they said they like group work and if they are often the group leader.

<b>Name</b>	<b>GPA</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Major</b>	<b>Like groups</b>	<b>Often Leader</b>
Amber	3.6	20	Com Studies	Yes	No
Kayla	2.15	22	Radio/TV	No	Yes
Lisa	2.7	22	Kinesiology/ Com	Yes	Yes
Rhonda	4.0	21	Interpersonal	Mixed feelings	Yes
Catherine	3.19	21	Interpersonal	Mixed feelings	No
Bailey	2.9	22	Advertising	Yes	Yes
Victoria	2.3	21	Com Studies	•	•

There were 18 people in the Fall 2007 Small Group Communication class at a mid-sized Texas university. Seven of them were women. Descriptors of the seven women I came to know over the course of the semester, shown in Table 1, are expanded and pseudonyms are used to identify them.

*Amber* is a 20-year old junior majoring in Communication with an emphasis in communication studies. Her GPA is 3.6 on a 4.0 scale. She was born in Springfield, Missouri and raised in the small East Texas town of Woden by both parents. She has one older sister and two younger brothers.

That is Amber on paper. In person she is White with wispy dark brown hair pulled into a curly little ponytail. She has gray-blue eye and a shy smile. She talks with just the

slightest lisp, and she answers questions with “Yes, m’am,” or “No, m’am.” She says when she was little she was so “hyper” she had a hard time listening and focusing on “doing what I was supposed to.” Although she was never diagnosed as ADD or ADHD, she has never been able to sit and study for more than 20 or 30 minutes at a time. Her mother is a speech therapist and her father is a university professor. Amber’s older sister is the student body vice president and she says her younger brother is a genius. Her youngest brother is still in elementary school.

Amber enrolled in the Small Group class because she thought it would be fun.

“I like groups,” she tells me. “I like being a part of a group, meeting new people. I think I am a big group person. If I have somebody give me a deadline and I know if I don’t do something it’s going to hurt-slash-benefit the whole group, that’s something I like. If I don’t understand something they can help me. This class is a requirement for my degree but it’s a useful class. I don’t think anybody can avoid working in groups.”

*Kayla* is a 22-year old senior majoring in radio and TV in the Department of Communication. Her current GPA is 2.15. She was born in Tyler and raised in New Braunfels and Lufkin by her mother, “who does nails for a living.” Kayla is White with highlighted blonde hair, dramatic blue eyes, lots of eye shadow and shiny lip gloss. The history of her life is like a country song—she tells me her mama’s mama died of a gunshot wound, her aunt called protective services on her mom, her cousin got pregnant by a married man. Her grandparents on her father’s side thought she was deaf for a long time, “because I have really bad selective hearing,” she explains. Kayla was a cheerleader in middle school and high school and says that although she liked the teams, she doesn’t like working in groups.

“I feel like everybody in my group doesn’t do their job,” she says. “If I have to be in a group I will but if I could choose I would rather do it on my own.” She took the Small Group Communication class as an upper level elective and said she thought it was going to be a breeze.

*Lisa* is a 22-year old senior who is African American and has a double major in Kinesiology and Communication. Her current GPA is 2.7. She was born in Fort Worth where her father is a coach and her mother is a social worker. She has an older brother who she followed around as he played baseball and softball and track. She attends the university on a full track scholarship and runs or works out at least three hours a day. From elementary school through high school, she was involved in Jack and Jill of America, a social club for African American families. Lisa is very athletic and slim, wears big hoop earrings with her sports-team T-shirt, has shoulder-length straight Black hair and a bright smile.

She tells me she prefers to work in groups over working alone, but that wasn’t why she took the Small Group class. “Honestly, I needed one more credit. And it happened to fit in my time schedule,” Lisa admits.

*Rhonda* is a 21-year old sophomore majoring in Interpersonal Communication. Her current GPA is a perfect 4.0. She and her younger sister were born and raised in Missouri City near Houston. Rhonda is White with light brown wavy medium-length hair, direct hazel eyes, and a quick smile. There are no hard angles about her. Before she came to the university, she never got grades, because she and her sister were home schooled. That doesn’t mean, however, that she was never in classroom situations.

“There’s a big community in Houston of home school students and I was involved in different home school groups that would meet once a week and do crafts and different things. In high school, I went to a classical education school once a week,” she explains.

The Small Group Communication class is part of the core for Rhonda’s degree and works with her plan to eventually get a master’s degree in social work or counseling. She seems to have mixed feelings about collaborative learning, and tells me she likes group work but a lot of the time she feels like she could do the work better by herself.

*Catherine* is a 21-year old senior majoring in Interpersonal Communication. Her current GPA is 3.19. She is an only child raised by “workaholic” divorced parents in Dallas. Her mother was in the energy business and her father was a realtor. When asked what she was like as a child she says she was organized and really neat. Catherine is White, thin, cautious and parsimonious with her words. She took the small group class because “It’s a requirement for my major.” She likes collaborative learning but says she has been in some really horrible groups in the School of Business where “no one wants to do anything so I end up doing everything myself.” Catherine tells me she doesn’t like to read, she is not good at math or science and she doesn’t like to write. She attributes her success in school to the fact that she is a good student, pays attention in class, never talks out of turn and is organized.

*Bailey* is a 22-year old senior majoring in Advertising in the Department of Communication. Her current GPA is 2.9. She is on the far side of the gregarious scale from Catherine. She says she was the first born of three siblings raised by two sets of parents and step-parents in Plano and Allen, Texas. It used to make her feel different, having two mothers and two fathers, she says, but it never really bothered her. “I pretty

much got what I wanted,” she laughs. “I was definitely the child you see at Target kicking and screaming for a toy.” She was enrolled in a Montessori school and could read out loud so early that her mother was very proud of her.

Bailey is White and has brown eyes, a round face and long streaked brown and blonde hair. She laughs a lot and is like her mother because “if we don’t write things down we’ll forget them. And we’re both outgoing and bubbly.”

She signed up for the class because she took an advertising class that used collaborative learning techniques and she loved it. These three hours will count toward her minor in Communication Studies.

*Victoria* is a 21-year old junior majoring in Communication Studies. She is working on a teaching certification through the university’s Education Department. Her current GPA is 2.3. She is African American and was the third of three children born and raised in Mt. Pleasant, Texas. She is taking the small group class because it is a requirement for the speech communication emphasis. She seems quiet and doodles during class, but looks up and smiles encouragingly at Dr. Parker when the professor attempts to add humor to the lecture. She is the only woman who chose not to participate in the in-depth interview sessions.

### Summary

This study is based on a small purposeful sample of university students who have had classes that utilize collaborative learning techniques. It is not meant to be generalizable, but it to provide an in-depth examination of collaborative learning in higher education through surveys, observation and interviews. Some previous research indicates that women respond favorably to collaborative learning and that women and

men do equally well in collaborative learning. Observations and interviews with women who were taking a class specifically designed to address the issues of collaborative learning offers detailed responses to small group techniques in university and classrooms. This chapter reviewed the purpose of the study, the key research questions, the qualitative research, participant selection, data collection and data analysis. In Chapter IV, I present the findings based on the general survey, the observations and the in-depth interviews.



## CHAPTER IV

### PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this study is to explore women's ways of learning as they negotiate collaborative group projects in a university. This qualitative study extends the existing literature by providing depth to the research on women's learning through observation of women in group activities, surveys about college students' attitudes toward collaborative learning, and in-depth interviews with women who were taking a university course on Small Group Communication. It is intended to explore their thoughts about their experiences and the way they negotiate their experiences in the class.

In this section, I have grouped answers to the surveys, observations and interviews to answer my three research questions:

- 1) How do women negotiate collaborative learning in a college course?
- 2) How do the theories of how women learn help us understand the experience of women in a collaborative learning context in a college course?
- 3) How do the theories of collaborative learning inform the experiences of women in a collaborative learning context in a college course?

Each section includes discussions of the findings. In Chapter V, I offer implications for practice and recommendations for further research.

#### Findings in a General Survey

I had read the literature about women in collaborative learning, and I had organized group work in the classes I teach at the university. But I wanted to know more about women in collaborative learning and their experiences negotiating group work. My first step was to give an open-ended survey in three different advertising classes at the

university. Forty-eight students took it, and the answers of the women and men were distinctly different. Their responses provided the basis for the first part of my quest to understand how women experience collaborative learning.

The first survey question I had asked the 48 students was “*What is your role in a group?*”

Sixteen out of 25 of the women, or sixty-four percent, answered that they are usually the leader, planner or organizer. One of the women answered, “I have always liked to be the leader of the group I am working in. I like to be able to have control over the project and know that all parts are carried out in the right manner.” Another of the women said, “In group work I tend to step up and try to be somewhat of a leader because I know if we don’t stay on track and don’t get everything done, this would affect all of our grades.” The women who did not list themselves as the leader in group work said they are the scribe, a contributor, strong, dependable, silent, and “the workhorse.” Only one of the women said she is “a joker” in group work and one said she “likes to do the creative parts like making posters, signs, props, etc.” Not one woman said she is the “idea person.”

Only two of the men said they are the leader, although one qualified that by saying, “I am a follower and sometimes a leader.” The men most often said they are the “idea person,” the funny one, or a source of creativity. One of the men said, “I like to be somewhat involved, but I don’t want to be the one in charge. There’s no real motivation to be in charge—it’s extra stress and work without any extra benefits.” Another of the men said, “Inside a group my gifts blossom, even with strangers my personality breaks barriers. Inside the group, I have multiple personalities depending on the people around

me. I can be the leader, I can be the funny one, I can keep us on schedule and I can be the one that is mad.” Another man said he is “the straw that stirs the drink.”

The second question was “*What makes a good group experience for you?*”

The women’s answers included the words “comfortable,” “open-minded,” “cooperative,” “accomplish something big,” “pride,” “effort,” “positive,” “work hard,” and “reliable.” Women also said:

- “A good group experience is when everyone comes to the meeting and works hard. A group that wants to get more out of the assignment than just an A, (such as) a complete understanding and self satisfaction.”
- “A good group experience is one in which everyone works together. I know that everyone doesn’t always agree, but to make a group work for me I need open-minded people who can accept when their idea might be good, great even, but not necessarily right.”
- “When everyone works together to accomplish something big at the end. My basketball team would be a great example. Last semester, my basketball team worked hard, practiced everyday and at each game everyone scored. Hard work from everyone resulted in a championship.”
- “Where people get along, follow the time line and successfully complete the goal or task with pride.”
- “Everyone making an effort, with the subject and with each other.”

The men answered the same question with frequent use of the word “fun.” For example, “Everyone should get along and achieve the goal stated in a timely manner while having fun,” “Having fun with it. Might not be the best project but we are proud of

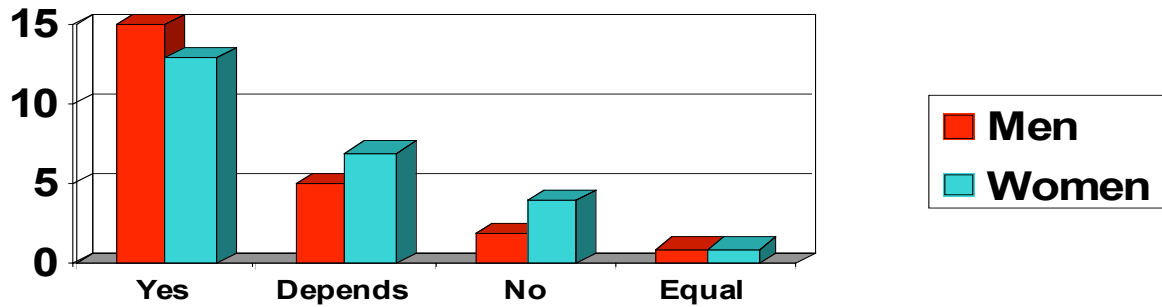
it/enjoyed doing it,” and “Fun amongst the group while getting stuff done.” Other responses which were repeated in the men’s answers were “equal,” “not selfish,” “everyone picks a role and fulfills it,” “accepting” and “cooperative.” One man answered that a good group experience is “getting to know everyone in the group, laughing with the group. Being able to work with the group as a whole. Having a lot of similarities with each group member.”

The third question was *“What makes a bad group experience for you?”*

In the women’s answers, the words “slacker,” “lazy” or “one person having to do all the work” were mentioned 13 times. One woman said a bad group experience is “lack of communication throughout the group members, unreliability, lack of leadership and more laziness.” Another said, “I don’t like group work when I am stuck with people who rely on others to give them a grade and perform all group tasks. Because I am an over-achiever, I am very selective of group members.” One woman said a bad group experience is “when no one shows up or is always late. Does not do their part and takes too long to do it. Does a half job on their part. Has a bad attitude and doesn’t care what they get on the project.”

Men mentioned “taking up the slack” once, “lazy” once and they objected to people who don’t do the work five times. Men said bad group experiences include dominate group member, “people all trying to be the leaders,” and “all of my ideas have been trashed.”

The fourth question was *“Do you learn as much in a group as alone?”*



*Figure 2.* 48 students answered the general survey question “Do you learn as much in a group as alone?”

The answers to the question about learning alone, as seen in Figure 2, include:

- Learn as much in a group as alone: 13 women (52 percent) and 15 men (65 percent, the highest percentage of answers).
- Depends on the project and the group members: 7 women (28 percent) and 5 men (22 percent).
- Do not learn as much in a group: 4 woman (16 percent) and 2 men (9 percent).
- Learned an equal amount in a group as alone: 1 man or .45 percent; 1 woman (4 percent).

In other words, 13 percent more men than women feel they learn as much in a group as along. Almost twice as many women than men feel they do not learn as much in a group as they do alone.

Comments from women included:

- “I have my own study techniques and ways of thinking. But also being in a group keeps me motivated and gives me other points of view to consider.”

- “I learn more in a group if there are people in the group that want to learn, and go deeper into whatever topic is at hand but if the group isn’t serious about what is going on then I would say better alone.”
- “I learn more when I am alone because I can become very easily distracted with others around.”
- “You learn as much as you want to learn period, whether in a group or alone.”

Comments from men include:

- “I learn more in a group of candid, interactive members who share my interest and are as knowledgeable as or more knowledgeable than I am in the area. Otherwise, I learn more by myself.”
- “I think I actually learn better as a group than I do alone. Something about being around other people and seeing them work, it helps me to work just as much. I stay focused when I am surrounded by other people who have the same goal and putting ideas together is always better than brainstorming all by yourself.”

The fifth question is “*Do you work as hard in a group as alone?*”

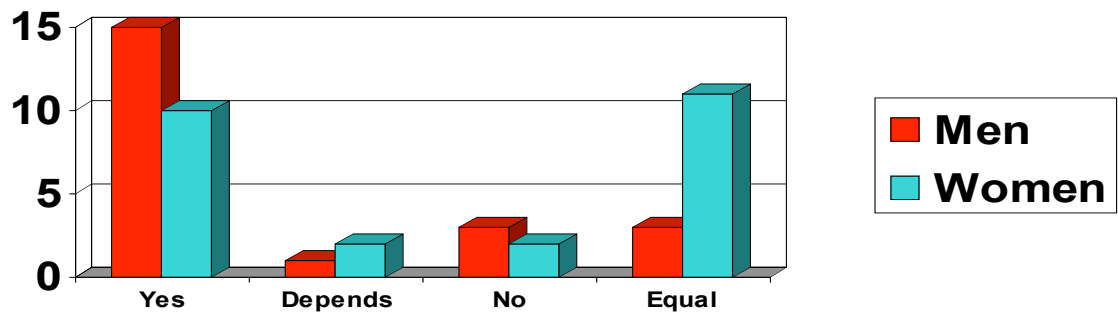


Figure 3. 48 students answered the general survey question “Do you work as hard in a group as you do alone?”

The answers to the question about working hard, as seen in Figure 3, include:

- Work as hard in a group as alone: 10 women (40 percent); 15 men (68 percent).
- Depends on the assignment and the group: 2 women (8 percent); 1 man (.45 percent)
- Do not work as hard in a group as alone: 2 women (.8 percent); 3 men (13 percent)
- Work an equal amount in a group as alone: 11 women (44 percent); 3 men (13 percent).

The women said:

- “I work harder in a group because I am competitive and feel I have to ‘win’ everything.”
- “You may work less in a group because the work could be split among members. If you have a lazy group, you may work more because you are doing all the work.”
- “If it is a good group I work as hard, if it is a bad group sometimes I end up doing more work.”
- “It depends on the project and my personal motivation. I always strive to work hard, but if I am in a group where members are slacking—I lose my motivation.”
- “Although I work hard alone, I feel I am forced to work harder in a group because of the fear others will not fulfill their responsibilities.”

The men answered:

- “I work harder since other people are counting on me.”

- “I probably work harder alone than in a group, because alone I know I have no one to fall back on but myself. In a group, I often have to consciously slow down to allow opportunities for other group members.”
- “I would say I work harder when I am with a group because I don’t want to let anyone in my group down.”

### Discussion of the General Survey

My strong impression after the surveys was that women are negotiating collaborative learning by serving as the leader, the organizer, even the workhorse. Men, on the other hand, characterized their participation in groups as the person who brings the ideas and adds to the fun. Women said a good group included pride and hard work, men said a good group included fun and laughter. Women were worried about having slackers in their groups, men worried about people who tried to be leaders or did not appreciate their ideas. I wanted to explore this tension between the ways women and men say they negotiate collaborative learning. Further, I wanted to know more about why almost twice as many women than men said they feel they do not learn as much in a group as they do alone. I noticed that when women said they worked harder in a group than alone, they added that they often worked hard to make up for someone who didn’t do their share.

On the basis of the surveys alone, I would have said women negotiate collaborative learning by working hard, serving as leaders, and doing more than their share of work to make up for work other people do not do. When I entered the Small Group Communication class to begin observing, I had the results of my survey in hand. I wondered if the statistics from my survey would play out in the class over the course of a



semester. In addition, I wondered how the class would correspond to the theories of how women learn and the theories of collaborative learning.

### Findings in Observations and In-Depth Interviews

Midway through the semester the students in the Small Group Communication class are circled into three groups. In one group, Colton jokes that he would like “Supreme Dictator” listed next to his name. In another group, Victoria tries to get her four male group mates to stop their innuendo and “cheesiness.” In the third group, four women are dividing their research assignments while one man almost nods off and another man texts on his cell phone. These groups, I believe, show three aspects of the spectrum of experience women have in collaborative learning.

This is the class designed to teach students how to negotiate small group learning in a mid-sized Texas university. Because I want to learn how women experience learning in groups, I am observing students as they prove and disprove the literature about group learning, as they work hard and work a little, and as they engage and disengage.

Throughout the semester I sit on the periphery of this classroom and observe the gradual evolution of groups through to their final grade and peer ratings. I watch these students meet each other, get assigned to groups, chose group names and pick leaders. I have in-depth talks with the women and I compare what is happening in the class to results of a survey I conducted. In this semester I begin to believe some of what I have read about women in collaborative learning and disbelieve some of it.

As an organizing tool, I present this section chronologically by the order of the class observations. Within the chronological structure, I offer the words of the women from the in-depth interviews along with discussions of my findings and the literature.

### First Observation: Meeting the Women

In the university's Fall 2007 Small Group Communication class, Dr. Parker tells the class that groups are like individuals—no two are alike. She has taught this subject since 1990, long enough to know that this class, these 18 juniors and seniors sitting before her, will be unpredictable in ways she cannot imagine, and predictable in others.

“One group is never exactly like another,” she tells the students. “By the end of the semester you will know each other well, you will rely on each other, you will be different than you are now. I will walk you through it step-by-step, but I can't predict the outcome any more than you can.”

The seven women listen carefully to her, some nodding, some writing down everything she says. I sit at a desk in the back of the room and watch them as they negotiate the Small Group Communication course during the semester. I never talk to them during the class, and I move around to hear the discussions going on in each group. Out of the classroom, I interview the women individually and in-depth to learn about how they negotiate collaborative learning.

Dr. Parker developed this class as she herself negotiated how to teach collaborative learning. The course has evolved and changed over the years. She also teaches basic Principles of Speech Communication classes and she has found some of the collaborative techniques are helpful in that core course. Dr. Parker has a PhD in Communication from the University of Oklahoma and master's and bachelor's degree in Psychology from Northern Arizona University.

In this first observation, I get a syllabus and some data sheets about the class from Dr. Parker. I pass out the permission slips so I may be allowed to observe and interview

class members. Everyone signs and passes the sheets back to me. I find a desk at the back of the class and try to efface myself so the students can get comfortable with my presence in the class.

### *How the Women Feel About Being in Groups*

Amber looked forward to being in a group. She said, “I like being a part of a group, meeting new people. I think I am a big group person. If I have somebody give me a deadline and I know if I don’t do something it’s going to hurt/benefit the whole group, that’s something I like.”

Bailey learned the importance that employers place on collaborative learning during an internship in Florida. She explained, “Once you go and do an internship at Disney, you know how to learn. It becomes very much about your team and your groups, and stuff, and you depend on them and they depend on you. It’s a domino effect--if something goes wrong, it’s good to know you have a team.” Bailey now thinks it would be good to have group work in all her classes.

Lisa, a scholarship athlete, said she would rather work in a group than alone. She said, “Rather than just me being boggled down and tied down and having so much stress, I would rather spread it out and have a group.”

Kayla told me that she does not like working in groups, despite having been a part of a cheerleading squad throughout middle school and high school. Catherine said she had been in some terrible collaborative learning groups, but liked the group in Small Group Communication. Rhonda, who has a 4.0 grade point, said “I would rather get it done myself and I don’t have to rely on other people. In group work things take time, but

there are weeks that I am trying to get work done and I don't know if I can but when it gets to deadline and other people aren't getting it done, it's a harsh situation."

### Second Observation: Structuring the Group

Dr. Parker has been developing the format of her class since 1990. "This class is my favorite," Dr. Parker says. "I like the core class to give students the basic building blocks, but this class lets them learn how to collaborate before they get in groups and have to work together."

During the semester, Dr. Parker will combine and recombine the class members into small 30-minute task groups until the eighth week, when she assigns them to permanent groups. Even after they are in their final group, she parcels out the assignments so that the students do not have all the information about their complete project until the thirteenth week.

She uses the textbook *Communicating in groups: Building relationships for Group Effectiveness* (Keyton, 2006) which she supplements with hand-outs and online interactive articles. There are very few class sessions during which she solely lectures.

"I originally had the class do a much longer project, broken into three parts, with two of the parts culminating into oral presentations and one a written paper. Even from the beginning, I didn't divide the class into their permanent groups right away. I want to develop some sense of community for the whole class. I prefer to have everyone meet everyone else before being placed into the project groups."

During my second observation, the students enter the room, go to the front table and sign in without being told. If they come in late, they have to remember to sign in at the end of the class or they will be counted absent.

“Have you all met everyone?” Dr. Parker asks. “Do you want to meet everyone?”

The students look around and no one answers. Kayla points to three men and says she has never been in a group with them. Bailey says she has not been in a group with everyone yet. Dr. Parker sorts them into a task group by every other row, and mentions that sometime she might have them number off or create groups by arbitrary categories such as who is wearing blue shirts or tan pants. Almost everyone gets up and arranges the chairs into circles, but Amber and Lisa do not move and the rest of the students in their group come to them. On the video monitor, the words “What is trust?” appear.

Bailey is in a group of four men and three women who laugh loudly and often and talk over each other. I hear a lot of conversation that is not on the subject.

Victoria is the only female in a group with four men. Their group comes up with an answer first and one of the men tells Dr. Parker, “Trust is when we minimize apprehensiveness.”

In a group which has three women and four men, Lisa speaks up: “Trust is when people are honest, open, consistent and respectful.” Amber starts to say something, gets confused and starts saying, “Um, um...” and Lisa adds, “And everybody’s included.”

In Bailey’s group, each of the men makes a comment; the women do not say anything.

Rhonda’s biggest worry is out-of-class meetings with her group. She is afraid that it will be hard to schedule and get together. “I had a couple of group projects when I was in high school,” she says, “But since we were home schooled and not at school every day, it was harder to go do group projects. The school I went to had people from Conroe and

like completely opposite sides of Houston. Even if we were grouped for projects, it was really hard to get together.”

Out-of-class meetings worry Lisa too. Dr. Parker tells me privately that when she first started teaching COM 315, the long project she required combined with her lectures meant the students had many out-of-class meetings. “That produced a disadvantage for students with obligations other than school, such as those who were working to support themselves and those who had small children,” she explains. “As a result, I started looking for ways to keep the students focused on small group principles and skills and reduce the need for meetings outside of class.”

This is a course in Small Group Communication that helps students learn about collaborative learning and does not expect students to come to class already good at it. In *Women’s Ways of Knowing* (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986), a key point was that women learn best in environments of mutual openness and an ethic of care, cooperation and collaboration as they absorb their classmates’ ideas and share their own. After criticism that this essentialized women’s learning, the authors explained in *Knowledge, Difference and Power* (Goldberger, Tarule, Clinchy, & Belenky, 1996), that they believe all women do not learn the same way, and connected knowing, or gaining access to knowledge through other people, is not easy or natural.

Vella (1994) posits that group learning is enhanced by peers who can challenge each other, create safety for the learner who is struggling with complex concepts or skills and “invite the welcome energy of competition” (p. 21). But, she adds, teams present new problems as people must *learn* how to work together and learn in groups.

*Learning Style*

The women in the Small Group class each had a different way of learning. For some, collaborative was a preferred learning style.

Amber enrolled in the Small Group class hoping her peers will help her learn.

“I think even if I’m in a bad group I will learn something. I don’t think I have ever been put in group where we didn’t have at least one other person who wanted the same things I did, like making a good grade. If I don’t understand something they can help me.” Amber said she learns best hands-on. “I never have a marathon studying session,” she explained. “I can’t. I don’t have the attention span to do it.”

Rhonda said she learns best by relating the new learning to things she already knows. “I try to get as much information as I can and relate to other things that have meaning to me. That’s hard core courses like algebra but I look at it and you might not have use for it in your field but when you go and speak with people, then if they know lots about math at least you don’t look like a complete idiot.”

Kayla said, “I’m book-smart but common sense I lack a little bit of.” When she has to study, she sits down and writes down everything she needs to know, then goes over it. She adds, “What really helps me is when my mom, my dad, my brother, sit there and calls it out to me so I can’t look at the answer. Then I do a lot better.” Kayla also said that if book work is overwhelming she just gives up.

Bailey said, “I’m very ‘show me’ and I’ll understand. I’ve had a few teachers, especially in math, and they’ll just get up there and say stuff and not write on the board, and I have to see it and see how you did that in order to understand it.”

Catherine studies by creating acronyms, or she makes index cards with the words on the front and definition on the back. When she was younger, she had never considered going to college because she planned to be a dancer. She got knee problems in her senior year and had to quit dancing. During the long interview about group work she mentioned the word “organized” five times and the word “control” three times. None of the other women used those words.

Catherine seems surprised that she likes the Small Group Communication class and that she is learning in it. She had such bad experiences in collaborative learning situations in the business department that I was surprised she even took the Small Group Class. Catherine attributes her success in school to the fact that she is a good student, pays attention in class, never talks out of turn and is organized.

Lisa says she was “a good student in a bad school” in high school. She describes her study routine at the university:

I go to my kitchen table, I pull out all my books, and notes and papers and I go from there. I might go to the Academic Center but I can study at home just fine-- some people can't but I can. I might have music on low. I would read a chapter and while I read it I'm writing notes and maybe highlighting in the book. Writing would help me; if read it and then wrote it that would help. I would study for a couple of hours one day then another couple of hours the next day. I'm not one to stay up all night, I don't think I could.

### Third Observation: Forming Groups and Picking Leaders

Dr. Parker tells the class there are several ways to form groups-- random assignment, self-election and using appointed leaders who chose their group members. She announces that she has picked the groups for them. She says, “In the business world you rarely get to pick the members of your groups. They are usually appointed or are members because they meet some criteria. Assigning them mimics this fairly well; it does



away with a person being uncomfortable because they think nobody wants them, or one person being asked to be in two groups and has to chose, or the buddies who decide they can get in one group and play.”

In this instance, Dr. Parker has the role of the expert in class, assigning the groups rather than letting them pick their members. Tarule (1996) examined classes in which instructors were developing collaborative learning strategies. She found that in truly collaborative classrooms, voice, dialogue, relationships, and learning intersect, and she suggested that analysis of these intersections suggests a shift not only in how knowledge is defined, but also in the role of "expert" in classroom teaching and knowledge construction. In collaborative learning, the teacher becomes a co-constructor of knowledge rather than the source of it.

Some researchers feel the very act of creating groups is not fair. Pitt (2000) has written that any method of selecting groups and allocating projects, whether random or systematic, in general will give some groups an advantage and some a disadvantage.

However, group formation is a significant aspect of collaborative learning. According to Huxham and Land (2000), the three ways groups can be created are (1) allow students to choose their own groups (2) allocate students to groups randomly and (3) engineer groups according to characteristics such as personality, past achievement, gender, race or relevant skills. Some studies, such as those done by Peters and Armstrong (1998) suggest that groups are enhanced by being chosen by the teacher. However, the study done by Huxham and Land (2000) indicated no difference in grades or peer ratings in groups.

The students look apprehensive while Dr. Parker is talking, but as soon as she announces the names of the group members, they are out of their chairs and hurrying over to the area she designates for each permanent group. She tells them their first task will be naming the group. In this class Dr. Parker chose to engineer the groups according to past achievement. The gender balance of the groups was four men and one woman in Group 1, four men and two women in Group 2 and four women and three men in Group 3.

Dr. Parker tells me that she avoids single sex groups because she is trying to prepare the students for careers where there will be very little times they will be working in a single sex organization. She elucidates:

While there are notable exceptions, I do notice that all or primarily male groups are prone to neglect the maintenance (or social-emotional) roles or functions in groups tasks while primarily female groups may overemphasize these same roles or functions. Having said this, I've had all-female groups in which task role behaviors were very dominant and challenged anything I've ever seen from a male group. Some of the most nurturing and emotionally supporting behaviors I've seen in my groups have come from males.

### *Naming the Groups*

In Group 1, Victoria is the only woman with Kevin, Kyle N., Zane and Blake. They move into a circle, all leaning in toward each other except for Kevin, who leans way back in his chair and looks as if he may fall asleep. The group picks the name "The A-Team."

In Group 2, Bailey and Kayla are with four men, Jeremy, Colton, Hunter, and Joseph. The group seems very high energy and excited. Colton generates a lot of ideas and leads the discussion. Kayla laughs a lot at things he says and Colton and Bailey both write down suggestions. Jeremy doesn't talk, Hunter makes some suggestions. Colton takes the page he has written to Dr. Parker.

In Group 3, Rhonda, Catherine, Amber, and Lisa are grouped with men Chris, Clayton and Ethan. They get right to business and begin searching for a name for their group. Catherine begins writing down suggestions. I can hear Lisa over the babble of voices: “Whatever you put down I’ll go along with. How about ‘No Name?’” She suggests several other names and tells Catherine to write them down. Lisa proposes, “How about ‘All about Ladies?’” but gives that up when the men protest. The group settles on the name “Three Men and the Ladies.”

It is surprising to hear women call themselves *ladies* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Crawford (1995) discussed, this gendered behavior is a product of socially and culturally determined belief systems. The use of the term *ladies* may be based on the belief that *woman* is a loaded word. Lerner (1976) wrote of the terms *woman* and *lady*:

*Lady* functions as a euphemism, in that it removes the sexual and reproductive implications inherent in the word *woman*. The term *lady* is a reassuringly clean and asexual one. Similarly, the term *lady* connotes an absence of aggressive impulses in the female sex. Ladies do not struggle with powerful hostile and sadistic wishes, or at least they do not express them in a threatening (i.e., “unladylike”) fashion. p. 295

On the same day I write this definition of these terms, the university website has a notice that reads: “Ladies! Learn to defend yourself! Sign up today for martial arts.” A possible explanation is that women signing up for martial arts do not want to look like they are “struggling with powerful hostile and sadistic wishes,” as Lerner suggested. Lisa, who proposed the name, might have been using the movie title “Three Men and a Baby” for her template, or she might have been deferring to the men and wanted to appear Southern, genteel, pious, and domesticated. It is also possible that Lisa is signaling to the men in the group that the women will take a supporting role to the men,

“who are usually entrusted with maintaining the thrusting projections of the organization” (Hopfl & Matilal, 2007, p. 203).

### *Choosing Leaders*

Dr. Parker has the groups define job of officers before they elect a group leader and scribe. She requires that the reporter takes minutes of every meeting of the group, brings a hard copy of the minutes to class and emails them to the group members. What is written becomes part of the report of group at the end of the course.

In *Three Men and the Ladies*, Lisa says she'd be a good leader. Chris, the other African American in the group, nominates Rhonda. Then Chris says he would be glad to be leader. Lisa says she would be nervous about that. He tries several times to suggest that he should lead, but Lisa says she would just not be comfortable with him.

In an in-depth interview later, Lisa tells me this was the first class she had with Chris, but she knew him from around campus. I told her I was surprised she was so outspoken with him. She explained:

He wanted to be the group leader. He didn't show me he could be a leader in any way, shape or form. I wouldn't feel comfortable with him being my leader, and my grade, I don't know if it would have necessarily have reflected it but I wouldn't have trusted him to be my leader. First, he had sporadic attendance. I said, “You have to come to class every single day.” He said, “No, Lisa, I'm going to come to class.” “I'm not just going by your work,” I might have said that out loud, “I trust you but I don't trust you because one day you might get tired and you might just not want to come so I don't think it would be great if you want to be the leader, maybe if two or three weeks from now if you are doing a little bit better you might could step up and be a junior leader, maybe, but I don't think you could best be the leader.” I think that was how I put it to him.

After Lisa says that in class, Chris says maybe he could be an advisor to the leader. Lisa asks everyone what they want to do.

In an in-depth interview later Rhonda tells me, “We had to pick one between the two of us and I was like, ‘I don’t care, do you want to be the leader, do you want me to be the leader,’ she was like ‘You can be the leader,’ and I was, ‘Are you sure, I don’t care,’ and they decided on me. So that kind of forced me into that leadership role. At least I know that things are going to get done.”

Lisa told me in the in-depth interview that she didn’t think she could be the best, so she didn’t want to commit to being leader. She said, “I didn’t want my group members to be upset or put them in bad situation if I didn’t fulfill my duties because sometimes I do focus a little more on track, or I’m more tired from practice. So I don’t think I wanted to take on that commitment and not fulfill it.”

So Rhonda becomes the leader and Catherine, who has been quietly taking notes while Lisa and Rhonda talk, volunteers to be recorder.

In Group 2 (All-Stars), Colton has been elected leader and jokes that he wants to write Supreme Dictator by his name. His group is very quiet. Bailey seems to be taking notes.

Bailey tells me in an in-depth interview that she is usually the fun one in a group, “but at the same time, I always want to know where we are going, what time do we need to be there, how we are getting there. I am the one who makes sure we have set plans.” She was the leader in a previous advertising class group and thought it was ideal because “we were like a team, not just a group.” Bailey says there was one “guy and one other girl” and they helped each other and picked each other up when they need to. “To know they care just as much as I do about getting a good grade and they’ll try as hard as I will, that was nice,” she said.

Kayla has become the reporter for All-Stars and is saying, “We need to have open communication. If the leader sees someone not participating, he needs to try to get them involved.” When Dr. Parker starts to talk about the mission statement, a problem analysis, and establishing criteria, Kayla leans back against the wall and yawns. She doesn’t rejoin the group discussion.

In The A-Team, the men are talking in almost a whisper, with Kyle generating the most talk. Kyle says something and the men laugh.

Victoria says, “Now, you be respectful.”

Kyle says he has lost most of his body hair and slaps his bottom.

Victoria says “I don’t want to hear it.”

Kyle calls for a vote and they all vote except for Victoria.

She says “Let’s just keep the cheesiness down. We’re all smart enough to know how to do things the right way.”

Kyle says, “We can find some common ground.”

Zane suggests that Kyle be the leader and Victoria the reporter for The A-Team. She writes that down.

I feel one of the most significant findings in my study is the high proportion of women who said they are usually the leader in a group. This runs counter to statements such the class textbook that declares, “In mixed-sex groups, we frequently expect that males will emerge as leaders”(Keyton, 2006, p. 226). Much of the literature about groups indicates that women might lead when groups are primarily dealing with relationship issues, and men will lead when groups are primarily task-oriented (Eagly & Karau, 1991)

or where a democratic rather than a participatory style is preferred (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

The textbook by Keyton (2006) repeats the preconceived notion that women will only be leaders in groups that are dealing with relational issues and men will be leaders in task-oriented or participatory groups. In the general survey I did, 64 percent of the women and 2 percent of the men said they are usually the leader in ANY class group. In my in-depth interviews, 66 percent of the women said they are usually the leader in the class group and 33 percent of the women said they are not usually the leader in a group. The women in these groups did not say they are leaders only if the groups are based on relational issues. In the small group class I observed, only one group was led by a woman, and women held the job of reporter in all three groups.

The implication for education may be that some of the definitions of leadership are changing in university classrooms that utilize collaborative techniques. Wood (2003) writes:

Leadership, a primary quality associated with professionals, is typically linked with masculine modes of communication—assertion, independence, competitiveness, and confidence, all of which are emphasized in masculine speech communities. Deference, inclusivity, collaboration and cooperation, which are prioritized in feminine speech communities, are linked with subordinate roles rather than with leadership. (p. 237)

According to some research, once the leader role is established, behavior for male and female leaders differs only very slightly (Chemers & Murphy, 1995). Of all the differences that could exist between male and female leaders, apparently only one has been demonstrated in literature about collaborative leaders. Females are more likely to adopt a democratic or participative style of leadership and male leaders prefer an autocratic or directive style (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Ridgeway, 2001). This was the case

in the class I observed. Colton led his group in an autocratic style and the group led by Rhonda was very democratic. In both groups some students pulled away from the rest of the participants and distanced themselves from the work. The only group in which all the students appeared to be still be engaged at the end of the semester was the most relational group, the All-Stars, who exhibited group behavior some might call “frat party” style, whispering and making off-color remarks.

One of Bailey’s observations is that Colton is an anomaly in group classes. She says, “A lot of people think girls do all the work in groups. I think sometimes they do, but the other girl in our group was completely the opposite. But our leader, Colton, he was very grounded in what to do. It kind of changed everyone’s minds, because it was the male who was the leader.”

Kayla, who told me she would not have wanted to be the leader of the group, complains that Colton, the leader, is driving her up the wall. She told me:

He wants to sit there and analyze this thing forever and two days. I’m like, let’s figure things out and get this done. They’re dragging it along. I’m the type of person, let me get all my information together then I’ll write a report on it. I don’t have to sit there and analyze it for 30 days. I guess I understand things better than some people. I don’t know what he’s trying to do, but I said to some of group members, “Can we move from here, can we go on so we can figure out what exactly we’re going to write about?”

Although Kayla talked to other members of the group about Colton, she never spoke to him about her objections to his leadership style. Instead, she pulled away from the group completely, even reading a fashion magazine while the others worked. When we had talked earlier about how she learns she said when she is overwhelmed she just gives up, and this may have been how she felt in this group.



#### Fourth Observation: Building Relationships

This is a class session on the way that group members build cohesiveness, and Dr. Parker talks about Keyton's (2006) chapter on dependence and interdependence, communication climate, superiority versus equality and certainty versus provisionalism. Looking around the room, I realize it is obvious that the honeymoon is over in some of the groups.

#### *Personality of the Groups*

*Task competencies* are skills individuals use to help manage the group's task, *relational competencies* are skills individuals use to help manage relationships among group members and the group's overall communication climate (Keyton, 2006).

Researchers in group communication say that generally women place more emphasis on relationships than men and generally men place more emphasis on tasks than women (Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003). Researchers report that women are more likely than men to communicate caring and to want to help others (Fletcher, Jordan, & Miller, 2000).

*The relational/task group:* Chris, who wanted to be the leader of Three Men and the Ladies, has dropped the class and the two remaining men in the group have become disengaged while the women have become more involved. The name of the group has changed to "Two Men and the Ladies." One of the men uses his cell phone to send and receive text messages during most of the class. The women, however, seem very comfortable with each other. Catherine passes out her typed minutes from the last class meeting and the women read over them then compliment her on her good work. Rhonda leads in a very democratic fashion as Catherine takes notes. The women have all done

their work and present it easily. Today, as every class period, Two Men and the Ladies is finished before everyone else and the women spend some time discussing rain boots for sale at Target.

*The task group:* Kayla is getting increasingly aggravated with Colton's leadership of All-Stars. Colton is looking over the minutes Kayla typed and handed out to the group. "I need some clarification here," he says. "Should she put this in the notes?"

No one says anything.

Colton again asks for clarification and asks Kayla to read the minutes again. She starts reading it in a monotone, hunched over her notes. Not everyone listens to her.

Colton: "I don't know if you heard her." He repeats some of the things Kayla said and asks again, "I just want to clarify this. Now, on the analysis overview I handed out, what else do we need?" So progress is taking place in All-Stars, but Jeremy still hasn't talked, Bailey is barely talking, Hunter reads over his own research. Kayla talks only when she has to respond to Colton, and when he talks, she takes notes.

*The relational group:* The A-Team, however, has started to be a coherent group. Even Kevin is now leaning into the group, participating in discussion. The men seem to direct their comments to Victoria, either because she is writing down everything they say, or perhaps because they are hoping to make her laugh.

Victoria says she wants a definition of jurisdiction. Kyle starts explaining it to her, looking at his sheet.

Victoria apparently feels patronized and says sharply, "I understand that part."

Kyle looks offended. "This isn't it, we just start analyzing it.

Victoria is now apologetic: "I'm on so much cough medicine it makes me crazy."

Zane is very interested: “What kind of cough medicine?”

Victoria says, “Codeine cough syrup. I don’t do well with medication, that’s why I don’t drink.”

Kyle asks Victoria, “You know how they make that stuff?”

Kevin leans back away from the group and says, “I think we had better get back on track.”

Victoria looks over at Dr. Parker: “Shall we have her read it before we move on? If it flies, it flies.”

Kyle calls Dr. Parker, who comes over and reads it and adds a word.

Kevin: “Thanks. You got to keep them on track!”

The A-Team shows the trait that I noticed in the general survey—it is group work the way men often mentioned, as a fun experience. In the literature review, I quoted Wood (2003), who wrote about the cultural view that men are standard or normative throughout institutional life in the United States. Leadership is typically linked with masculine modes of communication. She states that there is bias against “feminine” forms of communication, including skills of collaboration in schools and the workplace. I think perhaps the statements made by men in my survey indicate a subtle response to what may be perceived as feminized classrooms. The men minimized collaborative learning techniques by calling them “fun” and talked about “laughing with the group” while women said they work hard and try to get a good grade in collaborative learning situations.

Victoria, who is the only woman in The A-Team, seems to have accepted the joking and innuendo as part of the group. As some men answered in my general survey,

The A-Team is “Having fun with it. Might not be the best project but we are proud of it/enjoyed doing it,” and “Fun amongst the group while getting stuff done.” When Victoria responded sharply to one of the men, she felt it necessary to excuse herself by saying she was taking cough medicine. She has become the audience for the male group members and they perform for her. Victoria, cut off from the support of any of the women in the class, negotiated with her group members by laughing at their jokes and accepting their off-color humor. In exchange, the men directed almost all of their remarks to her and seemed anxious to make her laugh.

Hayes (2001) suggests that since women have traditionally been in positions of less power than men, women have become more attuned to identifying the feelings and perspectives of others. While in some groups this may lead toward “connected” learning, with The A-Team, Victoria is operating in a gendered system that has made her the mascot to a group of “frat boys” who have brought the party to the classroom.

This group is not in line with one of the goals of collaborative learning, which is to make members feel safe. In the literature review I discussed Hunn (2004), who suggested that group work would enhance the feeling of equality and link the project of learning to the collective group of learners and would make the outcome the community’s concerns. Hunn (2004) further suggested that African American learners who would not feel safe sharing ideas because they feel alienated in traditional classroom would have their experiences validated in collaborative groups. This was not the case with Victoria’s experience in the Small Group Communication Class.

Rather, Victoria’s experience has been more like that suggested by Gajdusek and Gillotte (1995): “Women in small groups may face the additional burden of the more

competitive, dominating, and at least superficially, self-confident behavior of some (it only takes one) (*sic*) man in the group. In short, these women may be disadvantaged several times over: by language, by skin color, by economic status, by a lack of access to the forms of academic discourse, and by gender” (p. 51).

#### Fifth Observation: Strategies for Achieving Goals

Dr. Parker talks about leadership in groups, task and relational competencies and some of the things she expects on the final paper. While she talks, Kayla sits on the outside of the circle of All-Stars and reads a fashion magazine. It is obvious that she is no longer the reporter. Dr. Parker tells Kayla not to read the magazine in class and Kayla grudgingly closes it. She does not contribute to the group and stays only ten minutes more before she packs up her things, tells Dr. Parker she has to go and leaves the room.

#### *Women's Work*

Kayla said one of the reasons she quit as reporter of the group was that the job entailed taking minutes during every class meeting and any out-of-class meetings, printing out the minutes for all the group members and turning them in to Dr. Parker.

Kayla said:

I stopped doing minutes because I could not take it; I was too stressed out with school. I'm a full-time student and a full-time worker, I work over 30 hours a week, and I'm trying to do homework, and my boyfriend works two weeks on and two weeks off, and I'm trying to spend time with him, so I do homework and go to school, and go to work...I was just like, "I can't do this, I can't do all this," so I told them, "Look, can you all help me out on the minutes, I can't do this," so what we're doing now is that it is divided and everyone does one week of minutes, which worked out great.

When Kayla quit the reporter job, Bailey felt like the four male group members looked at her to fill the void: "Everyone just automatically kind of looked at me (to take the minutes), and I was like "Oh, no, I don't want to do that." Bailey said everyone

looked shocked but she said that she thought, “Sorry, guys, just because I’m a girl doesn’t mean I want to take notes for everybody.”

In the in-depth interviews, the stories the women told illustrated the way they did the work the men did not do in groups.

Catherine said, “You can probably figure out bad group members in the first few minutes when you meet people, because the teacher gives you a deadline and they say, “Well, good, we have awhile before we have to do anything,” or they’ll act kind of laid back, or if you’re in a group of all guys, they will usually push it off on a girl.”

Catherine was once in a group with four male students in the business department who “pretty much told me I could do the visuals because girls have prettier handwriting for the poster and tri-fold and everything, and so...they push everything off on you to turn in the paper.” She didn’t like doing all the work, but when the group got a good grade, she felt justified. “I know I earned that grade,” she says. “It happens often that the guys expect the girls to do all the work. I think most girls like to have better grades, the guys tend to not really care, so they think girls are more driven to finish on time.”

Rhonda thinks the problems with the male students in groups are common. “It’s hard to get the guys to read anything,” she explains. “They have problems reading through it and not falling asleep. But this is a big part of our grade. They do have good contributions and discussions then they just kind of go, ‘Well, we could maybe do it like this,’ and then just sit back.”

In a previous leadership class, Rhonda had been elected leader by her two male group mates. On a project where they had two months to work, the men read the paper a week before it was due. “It mattered a whole lot more to me if we got an A than to them,”

she says. “They’d be happy with a B or maybe even a C, but that would freak me out. So we had this class period to discuss the article we have to present on, and who’s read it? Me. So that forced me into the leadership role. At least that way I know that things are going to get done.”

Even Amber, who “loves, loves” her group in COM 315, had a bad experience on with a male partner on a project in a marketing class. She said:

Oh, gosh we had problems. I just couldn’t get a hold of him, so I ended up doing it all. He would always have some excuse as to why he couldn’t meet me, and it wasn’t always the best excuse. One time he was supposed to meet me in the library and he didn’t show up. And I called him in about 30 minutes and he didn’t answer and about an hour later he called back and left me a message that he was washing his clothes, and I’m like, okay, put them in the washer and come on to the library. That was probably the worst one. I didn’t try to figure out his reasoning behind it ‘cause I think he just likes to slack off. We ended up making the best grade in class, I don’t know how.

#### Sixth Observation: Managing Problems

Dr. Parker talks about task skills, such as problem recognition, inference drawing, and relational skills, such as affiliative and egocentric constraints and conflict management. Throughout the room, the groups seem to have definite “personalities.”

The women in Two Men and the Ladies seem quite comfortable with each other. Although they are definitely getting work done, the women talk as if they have known each other a long time. Amber jokes around and says “Just kidding” a lot. She even teases Dr. Parker and asks her, “Are you not taking care of yourself?” The women are now talking about skin creams and Amber’s eye infection that might be pink eye. Rhonda wants to know the exact length of the final paper. Catherine, who says she has no tolerance for ambiguity, wants to know about how the grade will be distributed. At the

end of the session, none of the group members seem anxious to leave, except for Clayton who has barely spoken during the group session and says “Six more minutes.”

The members of The A-Team have their papers out, and they are all going over them. The personality of the group is like frat boys, with one girl who is a buddy to them all. Kevin is leaning forward into group just like the rest. Victoria shakes her head “yes” often, looks at group members while they talk, even though most of the men are looking down. She looks over at me and smiles and nods. This is a little surprising to me because the students are usually scrupulous about not looking at me in class, the way people avoid looking at a television camera when they are trying to appear oblivious to it.

Dr. Parker looks at A-Team’s paper and says, “I want it narrowed down.”

Kyle says, “We’re working on it.”

Kevin says, “It’s too broad.”

Victoria asks, “Should I be the one holding that information?”

Kyle says, “I wrote that down as a positive effect.”

Victoria giggles.

This is a group that diminishes the group member who is a woman, rather than using collaborative techniques to help counterweigh the hidden curriculum. Victoria has found a way to negotiate the patronizing gendered behavior of her group mates by laughing at their jokes and being the audience for their innuendos.

In All-Stars, Colton’s voice can be heard saying, “We need to come up with a magnitude of effect,” then he tries to define that. Bailey is doodling on a notebook and Kayla looks bored. The personality of All-Stars is analytical, except for occasional outburst by Bailey, clapping or saying “Good job, group!”



Kayla no longer goes to the out-of-class meetings. She complains, “I think we could have already had something written up or rough draft or something right now but not to my knowledge we don’t.” The group met out of class two days this week but Kayla didn’t go to either meeting. She says, “I told Colton if I can’t get in there with the group, I said, look, I have already given you all the information I can possibly give you. If you want to email me you can, and he goes, ‘No, Kayla, it’s fine,’ so the group project has been working out really well.”

The members of the “All-Stars” group have become less, not more, relational as the semester has gone on. They seem distant and uninterested in their project.

Bailey feels the size of the group is a problem:

It’s too big, six people is a lot of people. I like four, or three actually. With six people you’re going to have someone who did nothing. That happened in every group. It was hard to get research because some people brought in research that was either not relevant, or not academic or opinionated. I like to get all my research from academic journals and that type of stuff. It was so frustrating to see what some people brought in, it was like, did you even read it, seriously? A lot of stuff we were getting was very one-sided not factual. This is my opinion.

Findings in research into collaborative learning support what Bailey felt—Bean (1996) said that three people in a group is optimal and Smith (1996) prefers to keep groups small to maximize involvement. In each of the groups I observed, there were people who were not “pulling their weight.” However, I am not convinced they would have done more if the group was smaller. Having a strong, autocratic leader like Colton removed the burden of hard work from many of the group members, and members of the All-Stars, like Kayla, found they were excused from doing their share.

Two Men and the Ladies are adjusting to the lessons they cover in the book. Now, when the group starts talking about personal things before they finish their work, the women point it out to each other and get back to work.

Amber has learned that groups, though her favorite way of learning, can get off track. “I didn’t realize that being too cohesive, too comfortable with a group could lead to us getting off on tangents about what we have in common,” she comments later. “I was, like, ‘Okay, we better get back on task.’ It is nobody’s fault in particular; it is the whole group, having so much in common. And I guess I never viewed that as having the possibility of a negative.” Amber says she is “basically just a member,” but she does the part that is given to her when the work is divided.

#### Seventh Observation: Inside the Group

On my seventh visit to the classroom, the students are moving into the homestretch with the projects. Today Dr. Parker has the students sitting in rows while she talks because she feels there is better focus when they are facing forward than in groups. She has finally given them all the pieces of the project, something they haven’t had before.

Dr. Parker explains to me later:

If I give the class the whole thing at one time they tend to suffer from information overload and become confused. I do give them an overview at the beginning of what the total project will be. It is the specific directions that I hold back on and give out as they reach the point of working on them. My second reason, also stated to the students, is that there is an order that works best and by holding back the directions I can get them to follow that order. One of the big problems with decision-making in business is that they often do not follow the order.

Catherine and Rhonda had different views about not getting all the pieces of the project puzzle from the beginning.

Catherine declares, “I like how she gave us different portions at different times so all groups were on the same track, not giving us the whole project at once. I think having the whole project would have made us procrastinate more or get lost, but I like how she spread out parts of project.” Catherine is very relieved about how well the group work has gone and proud that she is the only reporter who has turned in minutes for each meeting. She has decided she is glad that Dr. Parker had them in class for eight weeks before she assigned them to groups.

Rhonda shakes her head while she tells me:

I found it very frustrating not to know what this paper entailed because we didn’t know what the next step would be. It would have helped to see what was due, but we didn’t know if we were going to analysis or if there would be 20 other pages we would have to write. Our group was really good at meeting and getting through things, so it didn’t really hinder us but it was frustrating. I like to know “This is what you’re going to have to do,” not “I’ll give you instructions on this later.”

#### Eighth Observation: Rating the Experience

The groups turn in their group projects and rate their peers. Perhaps for some people it would be hard to judge others, but the women I interviewed did not seem the least bit conflicted about doing peer ratings.

##### *Peer Ratings*

Dr. Parker asked the students to rank their group members, including themselves. I asked all the women, and every one said she ranked their group leader first, then the reporter, she herself, then the others in the group. Not one woman rated herself last.

In this class, the peer ratings are included in a participation grade Dr. Parker gives the students. She said, “I give them a participation grade based on class activities, their participation in class discussions, and my observations of their behavior in their group

projects. I revise the peer ratings and make adjustments if there is widespread difference between my rating and that of the peers.”

Throughout the in-depth interviews, women mention that they object when they do the work and someone else gets the same grade as they do. Bailey protests that in a speech class she was in a group of ten people and there was one male student who “just did nothing and sometimes he wouldn’t come to class so you didn’t know if he would be there or not when you had to present the project. And he made the same grade I did!”

For Catherine, it was not hard to rank the members of her group. She explains, “The leader in our group did a lot, so she was first. I did the next amount so I put myself next. Some members of our group didn’t show up all the time. And obviously we had a slacker. I was concerned about whether everybody deserved the same grade. At first I didn’t think it mattered but then I realized how some people slacked off.”

Catherine remembers that Dr. Parker had warned the class members ahead of time that someone could be a great person and still get a 1 in the group (the lowest rating), or they could be a person who is really not nice yet does work that earns the best grade in the group.

Rhonda, who admits that she works harder than most people she knows, declares that she would be “a little upset” if someone who didn’t do the work got the same grade as she did, but added, “I don’t know, what every professor thinks is right, that’s okay.”

Rhonda was in a class before when one of the men did not show up for her group’s presentation because he slept through it. She reminisces: “So I called him as the class was starting and I said, ‘Did I wake you up?’ and he said, ‘Yeah, I’m getting up,’ but he wasn’t there for the presentation. I called him after class and he was like, ‘Crap, I

can't believe I slept through it.'” Rhonda's grade was not docked because the report was broken in sections and she got 95 on her work. Because she considered the missing student a friend she gave him a peer rating of 55, which the professor accepted as his grade. “I would have been upset if he got the same grade I did,” she says. “But I was glad he didn't get a zero.”

Lisa is pleased with everything that happened in Two Men and the Ladies and comments, “I think I got a lucky hand when I got placed in that group.” I told her some research indicates that women might feel more comfortable talking in a group, but she assured me that she has no trouble talking in any class. In this group she was “just a member” but in some classes she takes more of a leadership role.

I ask Lisa how this collaborative group experience compared to her experience as a college athlete. She says Rhonda has been a good leader in their group and has used some of the same techniques she uses in track:

I think I'm a good team player, I tell my coaches now that I'm more of a leader by example rather than by talking or saying what to do. Even now I think I do that with my team, because I think showing does a lot more than telling, in my opinions. If I feel like I am doing right and they're doing wrong, I might say something to them, so I might say, “How about you try to do it this way?” or “I don't want to undermine Coach, but why don't you try this because this is what I do and it works for me.

### *Grades*

The final grades for the group projects was 235 from a possible 250 points for All-Stars (or 94 on a 100 point scale), 230 for Two Men and the Ladies (or 92 on a 100 point scale) and 200 for The A-Team (or 80 on a 100 point scale). All students in the same group received the same grade. Dr. Parker used the peer ratings as part of the 75

points each student could earn for class participation. She told me none of the students lost points because of the peer ratings in this particular class.

As mentioned in the Literature Review of this paper, student complaints about groups are often centered on grades. Dissention includes complaints that group grades are unfair, debase grade reports, undermine motivation, convey incorrect messages, violate individual accountability, generate resistant to cooperative learning and often are challenged in court (Kagan, 1995, 1996). Pitt (2000) concluded that students' desires to receive the highest individual grades are often at odds with collaborative learning. Teaching practices that incorporate graded collaborative learning must wrestle with problems of selecting group members, figuring how to assess in-group factors such as teamwork and contribution and learning how to rate on performance instead of perception.

I asked Amber the difference in good and bad groups for her. She says, "For me, a good group is when everyone is concerned about their grade equally. A bad group is probably when someone just wants to pass the class instead of actually making a good grade. Bad is if we have different expectations as far as gradewise."

Catherine is the president of the honor society for the Communication Department and says that grades are her "most important thing." At the first of the semester she was hopeful that she would get good group members, but she was willing to do most of the work if not. She says a bad group is "mainly people who can't write very well or are not good critical thinkers," and a good group is "definitely people who can write well, with someone who is organized, who always stays on top of group project, who doesn't keep procrastinating and that sort of thing."

In university classes, groups which do not result in grades are not subject to the acrimony some women feel toward collaborative learning. However, graded group projects are the norm in some classes, such as advertising. Pitt (2000) offers the following conclusion about grading collaborative work:

Giving all students the same mark means that a sensible group strategy would involve having the weaker students contribute less. Although the allocation of marks is a motivator, factors such as teamwork and contribution to the group are hard to define and essentially impossible to assess fairly. Rating students on some perceived performance has as much to do with perception as performance and may sometimes be unfair; for example, the student who contributed least to the problem solving may give the most confident presentation. Some assessment factors can actually promote dishonesty and competition. (pp. 239-240.)

#### *Relational vs. Task Oriented*

The personalities of the groups I observed seemed to evolve according to the gender-makeup of the members. Two Men and the Ladies is relational, comfortable and friendly but the members are definitely task-oriented. The A-Team, which has four men and one woman, is the most relational with a “frat party” edge to it, and Victoria finally acquiesces to the men in the group who seem more concerned about having fun than working on the academic task.. All-Stars, with two women and four men, is authoritarian and task oriented, organized around its male leader, who controls the assignments and reports.

The women in “Two Men and the Ladies” seemed quite comfortable with each other. They were friendly and interested in each other, but Rhonda led them efficiently through each part of the project and they are always through before the other groups.

Catherine might have been speaking for all the women in Two Men and the Ladies when she summed up their experience: “I have grown a lot closer to the people in

my group and I think we worked very well. Our group had mostly girls and I think it worked to our advantage. We had four girls and two guys. All the rest of the groups had more guys and we definitely always had everything done first. So it was definitely to our advantage. To me, it's just about getting the project done."



## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This chapter includes a summary of the findings of the study, implications for practice in adult and higher education and suggestions for future research.

#### Summary of the Findings

Collaborative learning is attracting interest because it addresses several major concerns related to improving student learning (Barkley, Cross, & Major, 2005). First, most educators acknowledge that teachers cannot simply transfer knowledge to students. Second, many employers consider background and ability in productive teamwork a requirement for employment. Third, our increasingly diverse society requires new ways of thinking about how to reach our students. Fourth, colleges and universities want to provide learning opportunities for students of all backgrounds. Increasingly higher percentages of those students are women.

As the acceptance of collaborative learning in higher education climbs, one of the most noticeable aspects is the strongly held attitudes both men and women students have about it. There is high probability that students have previously experienced group work in the classroom and they bring their preconceived attitudes to each new episode of collaborative learning.

I believe this qualitative study extends the existing literature about how women negotiate collaborative learning by providing depth to the research. Through observation of women in group activities, surveys about college students' attitudes toward collaborative learning, and in-depth interviews with women who were taking a university

course on Small Group Communication, I have found some aspects of collaborative learning that focus on a distinct experience for women.

My findings answer my three research questions:

*I. How do women negotiate collaborative learning in a college course?*

1. *Women take group work seriously* and consider it to be very important. On the other hand, many of the men surveyed spoke of collaborative learning as “fun.”

The responses of students for my study have put me in a position counter to authors who specialize in group work, (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Eagly & Karau, 1991; Fletcher, Jordan, & Miller, 2000; Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003; Keyton, 2006). Their work often refers to a divide in group work that puts women on one side of group work (the follower side) and men on another side (the leadership side). The women I surveyed, observed and the interviewed were not followers but hard workers who accomplished the task at hand even if others in the group did not do their share.

2. *Women are often leaders* in group work. Sixty-four percent of the women and only 2 percent of the men said they are usually the leader in collaborative learning situations.

Some literature, including textbooks, state that women can be leaders if the groups do not care about accomplishment and suggest that in groups, women exhibit *expressive* communication that emphasizes feelings while men exhibit *instrumental* communication that emphasizes accomplishing something (Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003). Other research shows that men typically communicate more forcefully than women, which is particularly evident in task situations where men

generally talk more and for longer periods of time than women, interrupt others and reroute comments (Zorn & Murphy, 1996).

Because of my research, I take exception to those characterizations. I found that these university women expect to be group leaders and are surprised when men lead a group. Colton, the leader of All-Stars, is viewed as an anomaly in current university group work because he wanted to lead the group and was a very involved leader.

3. *Women end up doing more than their share of the work*, although they may have won the leadership roles. Almost every woman interviewed told of an instance of finishing up when her male group-mates slacked off or did not finish their jobs.

Many of the women I interviewed excuse college men for behavior they themselves would not even consider. Rhonda, who works so hard, excused the men because they are too sleepy to read the lessons. She also excused a man who slept through a different class group presentation, and spoke to the professor to get him a grade of 55 instead of a zero on the project. Conversely, when Kayla, who became overwhelmed by the job of reporter, quit, male group members seemed “shocked” that Bailey didn’t want to take over as reporter.

4. *Earning good grades is very important* to the women I studied, and they are willing to work harder than anyone else in a group to earn them. This includes doing the work the men failed to do and excusing the men for not doing it.

The women were very concerned about their grades and frequently said they would do all the work themselves to keep from getting lower grades. Throughout the interviews, the women mentioned they are more worried about grades than men, and they were aggravated when the men who did not work as hard received the same grade they

did. When a grade was given for a project, most of the women became worried and they were willing to do work harder than anyone else in the group to earn it. Women also said they do not like to share a grade with group-mates who did not earn it.

In Marsick and Kasl's (1997) research, there is the suggestion that America's tradition of valuing individualism creates habits of mind that make it challenging for students to learn to work and learn collaboratively. Their research indicates that the tension between learning for its own sake versus productivity may make it difficult for group members to step outside of results orientation long enough to truly collaborate. My findings indicate this is especially true for women who are very concerned about their grades. This may stem from the feeling that group work implies a loss of individual control (King & Behnke, 2005).

## *II. How do the theories of how women learn help us understand the experience of women in a collaborative learning context in a college course?*

Interviewing, observing and surveying women for this project revived the debate for me over whether women are relational or task-oriented. From the standpoint of an observer of the women in this study, I conclude that in the university classes I studied, women are both.

In my literature review, I discussed Magolda's (1991) study of college students which found that an interpersonal pattern of knowing like connected learning was used more often by women than by men and that impersonal patterns of knowing were used more often by men than women. In her study, students who used interpersonal patterns most often engaged in learning with peers, valued others' ideas, approached problems from a subjective stance and valued individual differences. This literature implies that

generally women place more emphasis on *relationships* than men, and generally men place more emphasis on *tasks* than women (Fletcher, Jordan, & Miller, 2000). Several current textbooks used in Small Group Communication classes (Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003; Keyton, 2006) include this research to reinforce gender stereotypes that women make good leaders if the group is primarily designed to be relational, not task oriented.

This is the problem that Martin (1999) discussed in her defense of Gilligan's 1982 research. She explained that feminist researchers worried that the literature would be used against women's learning because, "From the standpoint of the growth and development of the field of feminist scholarship itself, at stake was methodological advice that stunts feminist inquiry and promotes a view of women who differ from oneself as utterly Other. (p. 21)

Based on my research, I feel there is a gender bias that needs to be retired because the perception that women are solely "relational" runs counter to reality. Women I interviewed most often talked about the accomplishment of tasks in groups; men talked about getting to know and laugh with group members. In the group that was woman-led and woman-worked, respect, conviviality and hard work characterized the group, while the women in the group displayed concentrated on accomplishing the academic task.

*III. How do the theories of collaborative learning inform the experiences of women in a collaborative learning context in a college course?*

One of the goals of feminist pedagogy is to help counterweigh the hidden curriculum that diminishes women by using classroom techniques such as collaborative

learning activities. However, as Mayberry (1999) pointed out, it is important that collaborative learning and feminist pedagogy not be conflated.

Some groups, such as The A-Team, are a site of discrimination and power difference for women. Sandler, Silverberg and Hall (1996 ) suggested that the incongruence of the female learning style with the prevailing educational climate, which might be a better fit for men, lies at the heart of the chilly classroom climate that diminishes the academic performance of women. A common assertion is that women tend to learn best in environments that promote mutual openness and an ethic of care, cooperation and collaboration. My research indicates that it should never be assumed that calling a class collaborative will make it a productive, reinforcing site for women to learn.

### Conclusion

I found that the women in my study increasingly expect to hold the reins in collaborative learning situations. After my research, I believe women negotiate collaborative learning in the university setting by working hard, expecting to be the group leader and compensating for others' lacking by commitment. They worry a great deal about grades and they are not all completely convinced that they learn best in collaborative situations. In the class I observed, the groups which were woman-led and woman-worked were the most harmonious and the most goal-oriented.

However, stereotypes of women as solely relational persist in literature designed to teach students about collaborative learning. I interpret the fact that my findings contradict some of the literature because the current state of women's position in collaborative learning has not been adequately researched and recorded.

It is an erroneous conclusion that putting students into a group will automatically be a positive learning experience for women. In some collaborative learning situations, women are the leaders, the workers and the organizers. They do the work that the men fail to do, and they excuse the men when they fail to do the work. In other groups, women are powerless as men set the tone and create an atmosphere where women are the audience, the helper and the Other.

According to Hayes (2001), some theorists suggest that since women have traditionally been in positions of less power than men, women have become more attuned to identifying the feelings and perspectives of others, leading perhaps toward “connected” learning. Hayes suggests that we use conceptions of gendered knowledge systems “to consider how gender might affect the prior knowledge that learners bring to bear on the subject matter of an educational activity, what kind of knowledge they might consider to be important and how they interpret new information” (p. 40).

I conclude that collaborative learning must be carefully structured so that the gendered classroom does not allow men to “slack off” while women lead the group, do the work and excuse disengaged men. My research indicated that most men don’t want the extra work—as one male student said in the survey, “There’s no real motivation to be in charge—it’s extra stress and work without any extra benefits.” That leads women to a curious place—they are competing for a prize that the men do not want, but they have to share the prize with the men when they win it.

### Implication

This is a heuristic study that could be a springboard for far-reaching assessment of women’s role in collaborative learning. After surveying, observing and interviewing

students in a university setting, I found most of the women were very task-oriented. They were concerned about grades, about completing their jobs and about leading or supporting the group. In addition, they possessed relational skills which allowed them to treat group members with respect and friendliness.

This finding runs counter to literature which repeats and reinforces stereotypes about women's learning. The implication is that textbooks that include information about collaborative learning should be revised or rewritten to better reflect women's attitudes and abilities.

My research indicates that grades are especially important to women in higher education. The women I interviewed were willing to do much more than their share of the work to make sure they got a good grade. Knowing how group grades change the dynamics of projects means that educators who use collaborative learning techniques must be able to assess who is doing the work and who is not.

An implication for teaching practice is that greater efforts have to be made to recognize or reward students based on the individual learning of the members. Responses by women indicated they do not take group work lightly, partially because they do not want their grades pulled down by the slackers or lazy people in their group. Although many educators are focusing on the problem of how to grade group projects, I believe this area must be given further attention.

A further implication is that group work can still be the site of discrimination and power difference for women. Faculty members who use collaborative techniques should be aware that gender make-up of the group and techniques used within the group may work against women, not for them.



### Recommendation for Future Research

It is time for wide-reaching research into the structure and use of collaborative learning. Studies could answer the questions:

Is the gendered bias of the groups in my research related to the size of the university and the location in Texas? What would a study of collaborative learning in other universities or other states show?

My research was done in a department of Communication--what would a study show in the science or math departments?

Is the problem of “slackers,” or students who slack off and don’t do their academic work, wide-spread?

Is the problem with “slackers” gender-specific?

What techniques are being used that make collaborative learning a positive experience for women?

What techniques are being used to make group grading more equitable?

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## APPENDIX I

**CONSENT FORM****Women Negotiating Collaborative Learning****Introduction**

The purpose of this form is to provide you information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. If you decide to participate in this study, this form will also be used to record your consent.

You have been asked to participate in a research project studying collaborative learning techniques and situations. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how women negotiate collaborative learning. You were selected to be a possible participant because you are taking part in a class at Stephen F. Austin State University called COM 315 Small Groups.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be observed in class participating in group learning situations. Out of class, you may be asked to talk about your educational experiences, your formative years, and other aspects of your life that may pertain to your learning techniques and preferences. Your participation may be audio recorded. If there is any portion of the interview you do not want recorded, you may say so.

**What are the risks involved in this study?**

The risks associated in this study are minimal, and are not greater than risks ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**What are the possible benefits of this study?**

You will receive no direct benefit from participating in this study; however, the study may lead to better understanding of collaborative learning.

**Do I have to participate?**

No. Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without your current or future relations with Texas A&M University and Stephen F. Austin State University being affected.

**Will I be compensated?**

You will not receive compensation, class points or credit for your participation.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

This study is confidential. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you to this study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Research records will be stored securely and only Linda Thorsen Bond will have access to the records.

If you choose to participate in this study, you may be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only Linda Thorsen Bond will have access to the recordings. Any recordings will be kept for two years and then destroyed.

**Whom do I contact with questions about the research?**

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Linda Thorsen Bond, Stephen F. Austin State University, (936) 468-1265 or [lbond@sfasu.edu](mailto:lbond@sfasu.edu).

**Whom do I contact about my rights as a research participant?**

This research study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects' Protection Program and/or the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University and at Stephen F. Austin State University. For research-related problems or questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you can contact TAMU offices at (979) 458-4067 or [irb@tamu.edu](mailto:irb@tamu.edu) or Dr. Verna Barron at SFA, (936) 468-4402 or [vbarron@sfasu.edu](mailto:vbarron@sfasu.edu).

**Signature**

Please be sure you have read the above information, asked questions and received answers to your satisfaction. You will be given a copy of the consent form for your records. By signing this document, you consent to participate in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be audio recorded.

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not want to be audio recorded.

**Signature of Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX II  
GENERAL SURVEY

You probably have had lots of group projects in college. Honestly, how do you feel about them?

1. What is your role in a group?
2. What makes a good group experience for you?
3. What makes a bad group experience for you?
4. Do you learn as much in a group as alone?
5. Do you work as hard in a group as alone?
6. Are there some subjects that work better for groups work than others? If so, what are they?

*Information about you:*

Classification:

Major:

Gender:

## APPENDIX III

## FIRST INFORMATION SHEET FOR WOMEN BEFORE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Please fill out this information. No one will have access to your answers except Linda Bond, who will keep them confidential.

Name:

Classification:

Age:

Major:

Specialty area:

Current GPA:

Where were you born?

Who lived in your home before you started school:

Grandfather

Grandmother

Mother

Father

\_\_\_\_ Number of brothers

\_\_\_\_ Number of sisters

Others (please list):

Your birth order (only child, first born etc): \_\_\_\_\_

In class you took two personality tests. What was your designation in those tests?

What are the hours during which you could have a private interview with Linda Bond about your experiences with collaborative learning? *Please allow approximately 30 minutes.*

Monday:

Tuesday:

Wednesday:

Thursday:

Friday:

Saturday:

Sunday:

Your email:

Your phone:

## APPENDIX IV

### SUGGESTIONS OF QUESTIONS FOR IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Specific research question related to the dissertation Women Negotiating Collaborative

Learning:

How do college-age women negotiate collaborative learning?

Demographics:

- Age
- Classification
- Major
- Minor
- GPA
- Where were you born and raised?
- Number of people in your family

Open-ended questions:

Childhood:

- Describe the members of your family.
- I'd like to know what you were like as a child.
- How did you learn to read?
- What or who were some of the important influences in your life?
- How do you think your elementary school teachers would have described you?
- How would other children have described you?
- What was a typical day like when you were a child?
- Did you feel different from the other kids?

Middle and High School:

- What were you good at in school?
- Were there subjects you weren't good at?
- How did you learn?
- Was collaborative learning a part of the middle school curriculum?
- If so, what role did you play in group learning?
- How would your teachers have described you?
- How would other students have described you?
- What kind of activities did you do?
- Did you play sports?

Higher Education:

- Describe your college experiences.
- How do you study?
- How do you learn?
- Do you ever veer off the educational path? If so, why?
- Once you get your college degree, what will you do?

Collaborative Learning:

- What classes have you had that included collaborative learning?
- How do you do in group work? What role do you have in a group?
- Have you had good experiences in collaborative learning? Please tell me about some of them.



- Have you had bad experiences in collaborative learning? Please tell me about some of them.
- What aspects of a group make the difference between a good and a bad experience for you?
- Have you learned anything that helps you in collaborative learning situations?

In General:

- What kind of a student are you?
- What makes you different from other people?
- Are you different as a learner than you were in elementary school? If so, how?
- How would other students in a group describe you?

## VITA

Dr. Linda Thorsen Bond earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in journalism from Texas Tech University in Lubbock, her Master of Arts degree in secondary education/journalism from the University of Texas in the Permian Basin and her doctor of philosophy degree in Educational Human Resource Development from Texas A&M in College Station, TX in May, 2008. She teaches in the Department of Communication at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, TX.

Most recent presentations of research include:

Bond, L. T. (2008). "Pop-ups, pop bottles and pop culture: Advertisers wrestle the remote control," Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA) National Conference, Advertising Division, San Francisco, CA, March 20, 2008.

Bond, L. T. (2008). "Looking IN to get OUT: Advertising techniques applied to student digital portfolios. Southern States Communication Association (SSCA), Savannah, GA, April 3, 2008.

Previous national and international presentations have been on such topics as changing technologies and the teaching of converged news, comparisons of free speech protection for citizen journalists compared to traditional journalists, media convergence and society, women and educational collaboration, gender and race in advertising, and preconceived notions in media coverage.

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